

SPORTSMAN'S PARADISE

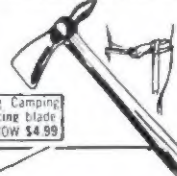


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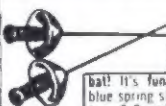
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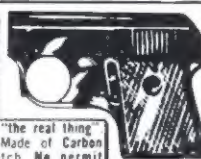


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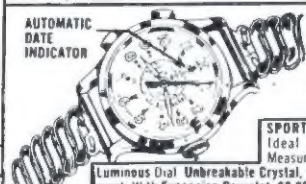


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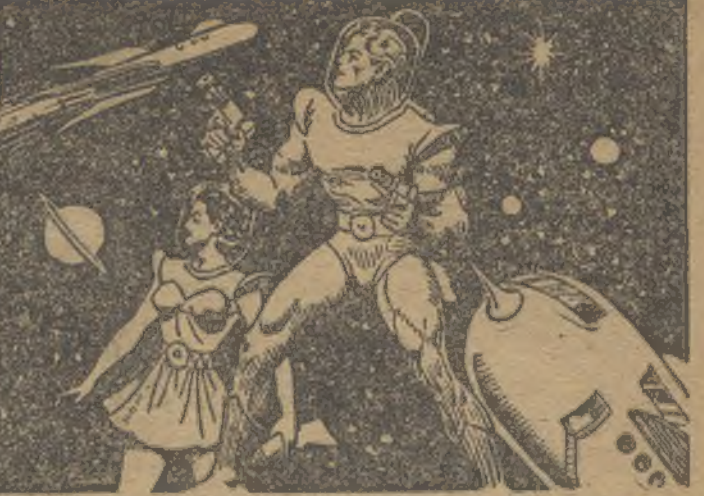
Novelet by
Poul Anderson



LAST CALL FROM SECTOR 9G

A Novel of the Bitter Star by **LEIGH BRACKETT**

PLANET STORIES



VOL. 6, No. 11

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

SUMMER, 1955

|| Two Novels of Distant Worlds

OUT OF THE IRON WOMB! Poul Anderson 4

Behind a pale Venusian mask lay hidden the arch-humanist, the anti-tech killer ... one of those who needlessly had strewn Malone blood across the heavens from Saturn to the sun. Now—on the naked rock of the Trojan asteroids—the rendezvous for death was plainly marked.

LAST CALL FROM SECTOR 9G Leigh Brackett 59

Out there in the green star system, far beyond the confining grip of Federation, moved the feared Bitter Star, for a thousand frigid years the dark and sinister manipulator of war-weary planets.

|| Five Star-flung Short Stories

ONCE A STARMAN Joe L. Hensley 23

The snares of space were incalculable, Lou Argonne learned. Lightning speeds, immense distances, stygian blackness, rushing stars, flaming meteors ... all piled up inexorably to impale frail Earthman on the spears of vivid imagination.

IMAGE OF SPLENDOR Lu Kella 29

Cold? Frigid? Why those ruling Earthwomen could put frost on a hydrogen burner, mused the frustrated O'Rielly as he gaily plotted to smash once and for all time the ingenious Venus dameblock.

THE BRIDES OF OOL M. A. Cummings 38

Ool was the saddest lover this side of Io ... either that, or the most skillful killer since the invention of Gilk's death-ray.

DUST UNTO DUST Lyman D. Hinckley 44

It was alien, but was it dead, this sinister metal city that glittered so malignantly before the advance of the three awed space-scouters.

ALIEN EQUIVALENT Richard R. Smith 53

The Martians were a weak, sensitive, dying race, frail and impotent before the superiority of the master Earthmen. Only in that grand and devilishly clever game of Duchal might sons of the red planet emerge from their shells.

THE VIZIGRAPH 2, 91

Rumbling columns roll ever onward.

Cover Illustration by Kelly Freas

T. I. SCOTT, President

JACK O'SULLIVAN, Editor

MALCOLM REISS, Mgr. Editor

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THE VIZIGRAPH

It might be well to point out to the winners of illustrations that in order to receive the pics desired your letters should reach the offices of PLANET as soon as possible after each issue hits the newsstands.

As it is now, the letters of winners No. 1 and 2 may arrive weeks or even months after No. 3's. Thus No. 3 becomes the initial selector, and more often than not his or her first choice might well be the very same illustration chosen at a much later date by No. 1. And since No. 3 already has the pic safely tucked under his arm, tardy No. 1 misses out on his first selection.

May this explanation assuage those winners who may be confounded in receiving a pic other than their prime choices.

And not to get too far away from the subject of pic winners, herewith the selections from the Spring issue: 1) A. J. Budrys; 2) Bob Hoskins; 3) Michael W. Elm.

A MESSAGE AND A CAUSE

1148 West 8th Street
Ashtabula, Ohio

Dear Editor,

Thanks for printing my letter in VIZI. If it serves no other lofty purpose it should at least get me a few thousand nasty letters from Freas fans.

I will try not to be stingingly vindictive in this letter since you claim that VIZI readers don't enjoy such like missives. Anyway, now that I'm a mature, sophisticated sub-neo-fan (having worked my way up from the fringe-fan classification) I have to write correspondingly mature letters. In the letter that follows I should reach the emotional depths of a six-year-old (which is pretty good since I have the I.Q. of a three-year-old). Here goes . . .

Top stories were THE BEAST-JEWEL OF MARS and CAGE OF A THOUSAND WINGS. Both created the kind of dream-reality that in my opinion makes the best s-f stories. I couldn't figure out the connection between the titles and the stories, though. Are you sure you didn't get your titles crossed? I can see some basis for that labored title on CAGE etc., but as for the other . . . what the H is a beast-jewel?

CAGE sounds a lot like the kick-off story for a string of sequels. If that's what you intended, Mr. Budrys, take the advice of this noted sub-neo and DON'T. Series never work out too well, you know. Law of Diminishing Returns they call it.

Your other stories just didn't jell. THE SPACE BETWEEN did evoke a few chuckles, though . . . and the illo a few other emotions.

The illos were as sloppily drawn as ever and the reproduction was as poor as possible. Only Eberle's lusty lass and Emsh's illo on THE BEAST-JEWEL OF MARS came through well.

Now that I've covered the (ugh!) stories and the (ugh!) illos, I will turn to VIZI and refute all the arguments of the fen—

including in my constructive criticism not only the BNF and neos, but also the little-old-ladies who write in to say how many thrills PLANET gives them in their advanced senility.

The big mixup: You're forgiven, Jack. It wouldn't be PLANET without the bungling. . . . You know, PS is either the worst prozine or the best fanzine in s-f. . . . You can confuse all great names except Mine.

TUNING: Must you throw in personal messages to your enemies in p.s.'s to your letters? . . . Who are 1) Ruch, 2) T. S. Eliot . . . ?

COURTOIS: Are you kidding? Who gave you such a brainwashing? Or did "They" take you over and give you a new personality? . . . If you're really serious, congrats on having a lot more guts than I'd ever have in such a position.

BRANDT: I guess you're assured of getting your letters in print by means of that sort of flattery (even eddytors like egoboo) but isn't "leader of s-f" going a little too far . . . or don't you read any of the other mags?

WALKER: Brackett and PLANET have grown synonymous.

SCOTT: Yea, Eberle often seems to be illustrating the wrong story. He turns out some fairly good illos, though . . . even if they are inept. . . . Oh, I don't know if fen write letters for FUN. I write because I have a Message and a Cause . . . to convert the world to Paananenism. . . .

DE GRUNSWALD: I agree 100% . . . and gripe letters make much better reading than the "PLANET is the best s-f mag" letters.

HOSKINS: Maybe some s-f fans take up a lot of room to say nothing but I have a Message and a Cause.

MARMOR: You have to comment on PLANET'S art-work; you can't talk about her stories without being stingingly vindictive.

ELM: I think all space-opera fans should be banished to AMAZING. I, for one, hope that Cap Future remains buried. Some stories are too technical, though . . . especially those in one magazine, ASTOUNDING.

BUSBY: I preferred the GEISHA MEMORY title (myself). I guess I'm a pre-pro (myself). If the stories get any worse I'll have to start writing them (myself) and give the field a shot in the arm. One thing worries me, though. How will I ever be able to sell a story with all the eddytors mad becuz of the letters I wrote to them as a neo?

MUSSELS & BUTCHER: Oh, yeah well prove it! (That last bit doesn't refer to anything special. It's just a good way to start an argument.)

KEOGH: Oh.

PAANANEN: Keenly perceptive and well-thought-out letter.

PLETEROSKY: Science-fiction is not here to stay. The building of the first space ship will kill s-f. The s-f fans will turn to science news mags (like the Science Newsletter). When the reports of the first explorations of other worlds begin appearing, no one will need the fictionalized accounts. There will always be imaginative literature of some kind, of course, but not of the "pure" s-f variety. You may think that s-f will turn to interstellar s-f when we begin exploring our solar system, but the zines will lose their audience because when people realize that interplanetary flight is a reality and that interstellar flight is next, their interest will be drawn to the science that would be making these things possible . . . not to the fiction that speculates about these things.

As you have probably guessed, this letter is from

that master of the inept remark, who now signs as
Stingingly vindictive,

VICTOR PAANANEN

UNDERGROUND PULPS

33a North Street
St. Leonards-on-Sea
Sussex, England

Dear Sir,

I have just received the Fall '54 issue of PLANET STORIES. (Sent me by Carol McKinney.)

I don't usually write letters to science-fiction magazines, but I just had to congratulate you on the cover by Kelly Freas, it was superb, and every bit as good as the one on the May issue. At the moment I am torn between cutting the cover off and framing it or leaving it on and keeping the magazine intact.

I have a good suggestion as to how this could be made possible. How about a plain front cover, say with just the date and some of the contents on it, and loose (or fixed) inside you could have the colored plate. It wouldn't even matter if you had advertisements on the back of it, (as you do now) but we could frame it then without fear of mutilating the magazine. Boy! What crazy dreams I do have.

I see quite a few letters in VIZI stating that the writers have trouble with their husbands and friends who think they are "nuts" because they read sf. It has been my experience that people think I read it, and I quote—"because of the sexy bits"—unquote. I think this is one of the main reasons why certain people look down on science-fiction, especially when the magazine concerned has a cover like your Fall issue, (don't think I'm griping, 'cause I'm not, I liked it) but it does tend to give the impression that the contents might be a little—ahhh—spicy, don't you think?

So you see, a plain cover with the colored plate inside the magazine would serve two purposes, one, we could frame the picture without cutting the magazine, and two, people would no longer sneer at us for reading something that to them would appear to be "dirty" literature.

Well, I would just like to say that I have never seen PLANET looking so good.

All the very best,

MICHAEL R. BIRRELL

TUNING OUT TUNING

411 Mayfair Ave.
Ottawa, Ont., Canada

Dear Jack,

I had quietly decided several months ago to abandon the somewhat enervating pastime of writing letters to magazines; I had settled into that happy, near-witless state of vegetation which is possible only when one does not give a damn for anything. Imagine my sorrow and chagrin, then, when I observed that it would be necessary to drag both my typewriter and myself out from under the dust-covers in order to aim some remonstrant remarks at that garrulous fellow who is definitely not my uncle: Bill Tuning. The condescending tenor of his trite effusion fairly roared for a reply.

Norman J. Clarke (no joker, he, no international spy) does not "really believe" that sex is a mere fad. He . . . and by that is meant "I" . . . does not "really believe" anything, and he said so in the original letter, which was solely bemused speculation on the possibility that sex is not the Eternal

(Continued on page 91)



OUT OF THE IRON WOMB!

By POUL ANDERSON

Behind a pale Venusian mask lay hidden the arch-humanist, the anti-tech killer . . . one of those who needlessly had strewn Malone blood across the heavens from Saturn to the sun. Now—on distant Trojan asteroids—the rendezvous for death was plainly marked.

THE most dangerous is not the outlawed murderer, who only slays men, but the rebellious philosopher: for he destroys worlds.

Darkness and the chill glitter of stars. Bo Jonsson crouched on a whirling speck of stone and waited for the man who was coming to kill him.



There was no horizon. The flying mountain on which he stood was too small. At his back rose a cliff of jagged rock, losing its own blackness in the loom of shadows; its teeth ate raggedly across the Milky Way. Before him, a tumbled igneous wilderness slanted crazily off, with one long thin crag sticking into the sky like a grotesque bowsprit.

There was no sound except the thudding of his own heart, the harsh rasp of his own breath, locked inside the stinking metal skin of his suit. Otherwise . . . no air, no heat, no water or life or work of man, only a granite nakedness spinning through space out beyond Mars.

Stooping, awkward in the clumsy armor, he put the transparent plastic of his helmet to the ground. Its cold bit at him even through the insulating material. He might be able to hear the footsteps of his murderer conducted through the ground.

Stillness answered him. He gulped a heavy lungful of tainted air and rose. The other might be miles away yet, or perhaps very close, catfooting too softly to set up vibrations. A man could do that when gravity was feeble enough.

The stars blazed with a cruel wintry brilliance, over him, around him, light-years to fall through emptiness before he reached one. He had been alone among them before; he had almost thought them friends. Sometimes, on a long watch, a man found himself talking to Vega or Spica or dear old Beetle Juice, murmuring what was in him as if the remote sun could understand. But they didn't care, he saw that now. To them, he did not exist, and they would shine carelessly long after he was gone into night.

He had never felt so alone as now, when another man was on the asteroid with him, hunting him down.

Bo Jonsson looked at the wrench in his hand. It was long and massive, it would have been heavy on Earth, but it was hardly enough to unscrew the stars and reset the machinery of a universe gone awry. He smiled stiffly at the thought. He wanted to laugh too, but checked himself for fear he wouldn't be able to stop.

Let's face it, he told himself. *You're scared. You're scared sweatless.* He wondered if he had spoken it aloud.

There was plenty of room on the asteroid. At least two hundred square miles, probably more if you allowed for the rough surface. He could skulk around, hide . . . and suffocate when his tanked air gave out. He had to be a hunter, too, and track down the other man, before he died. And if he found his enemy, he would probably die anyway.

He looked about him. Nothing. No sound, no movement, nothing but the streaming of the constellations as the asteroid spun. Nothing had ever moved here, since the beginning of time when moltenness congealed into death. Not till men came and hunted each other.

Slowly he forced himself to move. The thrust of his foot sent him up, looping over the cliff to drift down like a dead leaf in Earth's October. Suit, equipment, and his own body, all together, weighed only a couple of pounds here. It was ghostly, this soundless progress over fields which had never known life. It was like being dead already.

Bo Jonsson's tongue was dry and thick in his mouth. He wanted to find his enemy and give up, buy existence at whatever price it would command. But he couldn't do that. Even if the other man let him do it, which was doubtful, he couldn't. Johnny Malone was dead.

Maybe that was what had started it all—the death of Johnny Malone.

THERE are numerous reasons for basing on the Trojan asteroids, but the main one can be given in a single word: stability. They stay put in Jupiter's orbit, about sixty degrees ahead and behind, with only minor oscillations; spaceships need not waste fuel coming up to a body which has been perturbed a goodly distance from where it was supposed to be. The trailing group is the jumping-off place for trans-Jovian planets, the leading group for the inner worlds—that way, their own revolution about the sun gives the departing ship a welcome boost, while minimizing the effects of Jupiter's drag.

Moreover, being dense clusters, they have attracted swarms of miners, so that Achilles among the leaders and Patroclus in the trailers have a permanent boom town atmosphere. Even though a spaceship and equip-

ment represent a large investment, this is one of the last strongholds of genuinely private enterprise: the prospector, the mine owner, the rockhound dreaming of the day when his stake is big enough for him to start out on his own—a race of individualists, rough and noisy and jealous, but living under iron rules of hospitality and rescue.

The Last Chance on Achilles has another name, which simply sticks an "r" in the official one; even for that planetoid, it is a rowdy bar where Guardsmen come in trios. But Johnny Malone liked it, and talked Bo Jonsson into going there for a final spree before checkoff and departure. "Nothing to compare," he insisted. "Every place else is getting too fantangling civilized, except Venus, and I don't enjoy Venus."

Johnny was from Luna City himself: a small, dark man with the quick nervous movements and clipped accent of that roaring commercial metropolis. He affected the latest styles, brilliant colors in the flowing tunic and slacks, a beret cocked on his sleek head. But somehow he didn't grate on Bo, they had been partners for several years now.

They pushed through a milling crowd at the bar, rockhounds who watched one of Achilles' three live ecdysiasts with hungry eyes, and by some miracle found an empty booth. Bo squeezed his bulk into one side of the cubicle while Johnny, squinting through a reeking smoke-haze, dialed drinks. Bo was larger and heavier than most spacemen—he'd never have gotten his certificate before the ion drive came in—and was usually content to let others talk while he listened. A placid blond giant, with amiable blue eyes in a battered brown face, he did not consider himself bright, and always wanted to learn.

Johnny gulped his drink and winced. "Whiskey, they call it yet! Water, synthetic alcohol, and a dash of caramel they have the gall to label whiskey and charge for!"

"Everything's expensive here," said Bo mildly. "That's why so few rockhounds get rich. They make a lot of money, but they have to spend it just as fast to stay alive."

"Yeh . . . yeh . . . wish they'd spend some of it on us." Johnny grinned and fed the dispenser another coin. It muttered to itself and slid forth a tray with a glass. "C'mon, drink up, man. It's a long way home, and

we've got to fortify ourselves for the trip. A bottle, a battle, and a wench is what I need. Most especially the wench, because I don't think the eminent Dr. McKittrick is gonna be interested in sociability, and it's close quarters aboard the *Dog*."

Bo kept on sipping slowly. "Johnny," he said, raising his voice to cut through the din, "you're an educated man. I never could figure out why you want to talk like a jumper."

"Because I am one at heart. Look, Bo, why don't you get over that inferiority complex of yours? A man can't run a spaceship without knowing more math and physical science than the average professor on Earth. So you had to work your way through the Academy and never had a chance to fan yourself with a lily white hand while somebody tootled Mozart through a horn. So what?" Johnny's head darted around, bird-like. "If we want some women we'd better make our reservations now."

"I don't, Johnny," said Bo. "I'll just nurse a beer." It wasn't morals so much as fastidiousness; he'd wait till they hit Luna.

"Suit yourself. If you don't want to uphold the honor of the Sirius Transportation Company—"

Bo chuckled. The Company consisted of (a) the *Sirius*; (b) her crew, himself and Johnny; (c) a warehouse, berth, and three other part owners back in Luna City. Not exactly a tramp ship, because you can't normally stop in the middle of an interplanetary voyage and head for somewhere else; but she went wherever there was cargo or people to be moved. Her margin of profit was not great in spite of the charges, for a space trip is expensive; but in a few more years they'd be able to buy another ship or two, and eventually Fireball and Triplanetary would be getting some competition. Even the public lines might have to worry a little.

Johnny put away another couple of shots and rose. Alcohol cost plenty, but it was also more effective in low-gee. "'Scuse me," he said. "I see a target. Sure you don't want me to ask if she has a friend?"

Bo shook his head and watched his partner move off, swift in the puny gravity—the Last Chance didn't centrifuge like some of the tommicker places downtown. It was hard to push through the crowd without weight to help, but Johnny faded along and edged

up to the girl with his highest-powered smile. There were several other men standing around her, but Johnny had The Touch. He'd be bringing her back here in a few minutes.

Bo sighed, feeling a bit lonesome. If he wasn't going to make a night of it, there was no point in drinking heavily. He had to make the final inspection of the ship tomorrow, and grudged the cost of anti-hangover tablets. Besides what he was putting back into the business, he was trying to build a private hoard; some day, he'd retire and get married and build a house. He already had the site picked out, on Kullen overlooking the Sound, back on Earth. Man, but it was a long time since he'd been on Earth!

A sharp noise slashed through the haze of talk and music. Bo looked up. There was a tall black haired man, Venusian to judge by his kilts, arguing with Johnny. His face was ugly with anger.

Johnny made some reply. Bo heaved up his form and strode toward the discussion, casually picking up anyone in the way and setting him aside. Johnny liked a fight, but this Venusian was big.

As he neared, he caught words: "—my girl, dammit."

"Like hell I am!" said the girl. "I never saw you before—"

"Run along and play, son," said Johnny. "Or do you want me to change that diaper of yours?"

That was when it happened. Bo saw the little needler spit from the Venusian's fingers. Johnny stood there a moment, looking foolishly at the dart in his stomach. Then his knees buckled and he fell with a nightmare slowness.

The Venusian was already on the move. He sprang straight up, slammed a kick at the wall, and arced out the door into the dome corridor beyond. *A spaceman, that. Knows how to handle himself in low-gee.* It was the only clear thought which ran in the sudden storm of Bo's head.

The girl screamed. A man cursed and tried to follow the Venusian. He tangled with another. "Get outta my way!" A roar lifted, someone slugged, someone else coolly smashed a bottle against the bar and lifted the jagged end. There was the noise of a fist meeting flesh.

Bo had seen death before. That needle wasn't anesthetic, it was poison. He knelt in the riot with Johnny's body in his arms.

II

SUDDENLY the world came to an end. There was a sheer drop-off onto the next face of the rough cube which was the asteroid. Bo lay on his belly and peered down the cliff, it ran for a couple of miles and beyond it were the deeps of space and the cold stars. He could dimly see the tortured swirl of crystallization patterns in the smooth bareness. No place to hide; his enemy was not there.

He turned the thought over in a mind which seemed stiff and slow. By crossing that little plain he was exposing himself to a shot from one of its edges. On the other hand, he could just as well be bushwhacked from a ravine as he jumped over. And this route was the fastest for completing his search scheme.

The Great Bear slid into sight, down under the world as it turned. He had often stood on winter nights, back in Sweden, and seen its immense sprawl across the weird flicker of aurora; but even then he wanted the spaceman's experience of seeing it from above. Well, now he had his wish, and much good it had done him.

He went over the edge of the cliff, cautiously, for it wouldn't take much of an impetus to throw him off this rock entirely. Then his helpless and soon frozen body would be just another meteor for the next million years. The vague downward sensation of gravity shifted insanely as he moved; he had the feeling that the world was tilting around him. Now it was the precipice which was a scarred black plain underfoot, reaching to a saw-toothed bluff at its farther edge.

He moved with flat low-gee bounds. Besides the danger of springing off the asteroid entirely, there was its low acceleration to keep a man near the ground; jump up a few feet and it would take you a while to fall back. It was utterly silent around him. He had never thought there could be so much stillness.

He was halfway across when the bullet came. He saw no flash, heard no crack, but suddenly the fissured land before him ex-

ploded in a soundless shower of chips. The bullet ricocheted flatly, heading off for outer space. No meteor gravel, that!

Bo stood unmoving an instant, fighting the impulse to leap away. He was a spaceman, not a rockhound; he wasn't used to this environment, and if he jumped high he could be riddled as he fell slowly down again. Sweat was cold on his body. He squinted, trying to see where the shot had come from.

Suddenly he was zigzagging off across the plain toward the nearest edge. Another bullet pocked the ground near him. The sun rose, a tiny heatless dazzle blinding in his eyes.

Fire crashed at his back. Thunder and darkness exploded before him. He lurched forward, driven by the impact. Something was roaring, echoes clamorous in his helmet. He grew dimly aware that it was himself. Then he was falling, whirling down into the black between the stars.

There was a knife in his back, it was white-hot and twisting between the ribs. He stumbled over the edge of the plain and fell, waking when his armor bounced a little against stone.

Breath rattled in his throat as he turned his head. There was a white plume standing over his shoulder, air streaming out through the hole and freezing its moisture. The knife in him was not hot, it was cold with an ultimate cold.

Around him, world and stars rippled as if seen through heat, through fever. He hung on the edge of creation by his fingertips, while chaos shouted beneath.

THEORETICALLY, one man can run a spaceship, but in practice two or three are required for non-military craft. This is not only an emergency reserve, but a preventive of emergencies, for one man alone might get too tired at the critical moments. Bo knew he wouldn't be allowed to leave Achilles without a certified partner, and unemployed spacemen available for immediate hiring are found once in a Venusian snowfall.

Bo didn't care the first day. He had taken Johnny out to Helmet Hill and laid him in the barren ground to wait, unchanging now, till Judgment Day. He felt empty then,

drained of grief and hope alike, his main thought a dull dread of having to tell Johnny's father when he reached Luna. He was too slow and clumsy with words; his comforting hand would only break the old man's back. Old Malone had given six sons to space, Johnny was the last; from Saturn to the sun, his blood was strewn for nothing.

It hardly seemed to matter that the Guards office reported itself unable to find the murderer. A single Venusian should have been easy to trace on Achilles, but he seemed to have vanished completely.

Bo returned to the transient quarters and dialed Valeria McKittrick. She looked impatiently at him out of the screen. "Well," she said, "what's the matter? I thought we were blasting today."

"Hadn't you heard?" asked Bo. He found it hard to believe she could be ignorant, here where everybody's life was known to everybody else. "Johnny's dead. We can't leave."

"Oh . . . I'm sorry. He was such a nice little man—I've been in the lab all the time, packing my things, and didn't know." A frown crossed her clear brow. "But you've got to get me back. I've engaged passage to Luna with you."

"Your ticket will be refunded, of course," said Bo heavily. "But you aren't certified, and the *Sirius* is licensed for no less than two operators."

"Well . . . damn! There won't be another berth for weeks, and I've *got* to get home. Can't you find somebody?"

Bo shrugged, not caring much. "I'll circulate an ad if you want, but—"

"Do so, please. Let me know." She switched off.

Bo sat for a moment thinking about her. Valeria McKittrick was worth considering. She wasn't beautiful in any conventional sense but she was tall and well built; there were good lines in the strong high boned face, and her hair was a cataract of spectacular red. And brains, too . . . you didn't get to be a physicist with the Union's radiation labs for nothing. He knew she was still young, and that she had been on Achilles for about a year working on some special project and was now ready to go home.

She was human enough, had been to most of the officers' parties and danced and laughed and flirted mildly, but even the

dullest rockbound gossip knew she was too lost in her work to do more. Out here a woman was rare, and a virtuous woman unheard-of; as a result, unknown to herself, Dr. McKittrick's fame had spread through more thousands of people and millions of miles than her professional achievements were ever likely to reach.

Since coming here, on commission from the Lunar lab, to bring her home, Bo Jons-son had given her an occasional wistful thought. He liked intelligent women, and he was getting tired of rootlessness. But of course it would be a catastrophe if he fell in love with her because she wouldn't look twice at a big dumb slob like him. He had sweated out a couple of similar affairs in the past and didn't want to go through another.

He placed his ad on the radinews circuit and then went out to get drunk. It was all he could do for Johnny now, drink him a final wassail. Already his friend was cold under the stars. In the course of the evening he found himself weeping.

He woke up many hours later. Achilles ran on Earth time but did not rotate on it; officially, it was late at night, actually the shrunken sun was high over the domes. The man in the upper bunk said there was a message for him; he was to call one Einar Lundgard at the Comet Hotel soonest.

The Comet! Anyone who could afford a room to himself here, rather than a kip in the public barracks, was well fueled. Bo swallowed a tablet and made his way to the visi and dialed. The robo-clerk summoned Lundgard down to the desk.

It was a lean, muscular face under close cropped brown hair which appeared in the screen. Lundgard was a tall and supple man, somehow neat even without clothes. "Jons-son," said Bo. "Sorry to get you up, but I understand . . ."

"Oh, yes. Are you looking for a space-man? I heard your ad and I'm available."

Bo felt his mouth gape open. "Huh? I never thought—"

"We're both lucky, I guess." Lundgard chuckled. His English had only the slightest trace of accent, less than Bo's. "I thought I was stashed here too for the next several months."

"How does a qualified spaceman happen to be marooned?"

"I'm with Fireball, was on the *Drake*—heard of what happened to her?"

Bo nodded, for every spaceman knows exactly what every spaceship is doing at any given time. The *Drake* had come to Achilles to pick up a cargo of refined thorium for Earth; while she lay in orbit, she had somehow lost a few hundred pounds of reaction-mass water from a cracked gasket. Why the accident should have occurred, nobody knew . . . spacemen were not careless about inspections, and what reason would anyone have for sabotage? The event had taken place about a month ago, when the *Sirius* was already enroute here; Bo had heard of it in the course of shop talk.

"I thought she went back anyway," he said.

Lundgard nodded. "She did. It was the usual question of economics. You know what refined fuel water costs in the Belt; also, the delay while we got it would have carried Earth and Achilles past optimum position, which'd make the trip home that much more expensive. Since we had one more man aboard than really required, it was cheaper to leave him behind; the difference in mass would make up for the fuel loss. I volunteered, even suggested the idea, because . . . well, it happened during my watch, and even if nobody blamed me I couldn't help feeling guilty."

Bo understood that kind of loyalty. You couldn't travel space without men who had it.

"The Company beamed a message: I'd stay here till their schedule permitted an undermanned ship to come by, but that wouldn't be for maybe months," went on Lundgard. "I can't see sitting on this lump that long without so much as a chance at planetfall bonus. If you'll take me on, I'm sure the Company will agree; I'll get a message to them on the beam right away."

"Take us a while to get back," warned Bo. "We're going to stop off at another asteroid to pick up some automatic equipment, and won't go into hyperbolic orbit till after that. About six weeks from here to Earth, all told."

"Against six months here?" Lundgard laughed; it emphasized the bright charm of his manner. "Sunblaze, I'll work for free."

"No need to. Bring your papers over tomorrow, huh?"

The certificate and record were perfectly in order, showing Einar Lundgard to be a Spacetech 1/cl with eight years' experience, qualified as engineer, astronaut, pilot, and any other of the thousand professions which have run into one. They registered articles and shook hands on it. "Call me Bo. It really is my name . . . Swedish."

"Another squarehead, eh?" grinned Lundgard. "I'm from South America myself."

"Notice a year's gap here," said Bo, pointing to the service record. "On Venus."

"Oh, yes. I had some fool idea about settling but soon learned better. I tried to farm, but when you have to carve your own land out of howling desert— Well, let's start some math, shall we?"

They were lucky, not having to wait their turn at the station computer; no other ship was leaving immediately. They fed it the data and requirements, and got back columns of numbers: fuel requirements, acceleration times, orbital elements. The figures always had to be modified, no trip ever turned out just as predicted, but that could be done when needed with a slipstick and the little ship's calculator.

Bo went at his share of the job doggedly, checking and re-checking before giving the problem to the machine; Lundgard breezed through it and spent his time while waiting for Bo in swapping dirty limericks with the tech. He had some good ones.

The *Sirius* was loaded, inspected, and cleared. A "scooter" brought her three passengers up to her orbit, they embarked, settled down, and waited. At the proper time, acceleration jammed them back in a thunder of rockets.

Bo relaxed against the thrust, thinking of Achilles falling away behind them. "So long," he whispered. "So long, Johnny."

III

IN ANOTHER minute, he would be knotted and screaming from the bends, and a couple of minutes later he would be dead.

Bo clamped his teeth together, as if he would grip consciousness in his jaws. His hands felt cold and heavy, the hands of a

stranger, as he fumbled for the supply pouch. It seemed to recede from him, down a hollow infinite corridor where echoes talked in a language he did not know.

"Damn," he gasped. "Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn."

He got the pouch open somehow. The stars wheeled around him. There were stars buzzing in his head, like cold white fireflies, buzzing and buzzing in the enormous ringing emptiness of his skull. Pain jagged through him, he felt his eardrums popping as pressure dropped.

The plastic patch stuck to his metal gauntlet. He peeled it off, trying not to howl with the fury ripping in his nerves. His body was slow, inert, a thing to fight. There was no more feeling in his back, was he dead already?

Redness flamed before his eyes, red like Valeria's hair blowing across the stars. It was sheer reflex which brought his arm around to slap the patch over the hole in his suit. The adhesive gripped, drying fast in the sucking vacuum. The patch belled out from internal air pressure, straining to break loose and kill him.

Bo's mind wavered back toward life. He opened the valves wide on his tanks, and his thermostatic capacitors pumped heat back into him. For a long time he lay there, only lungs and heart had motion. His throat felt withered and flayed, but the rasp of air through it was like being born again.

Born, spewed out of an iron womb into a hollowness of stars and cold, to lie on naked rock while the enemy hunted him. Bo shuddered and wanted to scream again.

Slowly he groped back toward awareness. His frostbitten back tingled as it warmed up again, soon it would be afire. He could feel a hot trickling of blood, but it was along his right side. The bullet must have spent most of its force punching through the armor, caromed off the inside, scratched his ribs, and fallen dead. Next time he, probably wouldn't be so lucky. A magnetic-driven .30 slug would go right through a helmet, splashing brains as it passed.

He turned his head, feeling a great weariness, and looked at the gauges. This had cost him a lot of air. There was only about three hours worth left. Lundgard could kill him simply by waiting.

It would be easy to die. He lay on his back, staring up at the stars and the spilling cloudy glory of the Milky Way. A warmth was creeping back into numbed hands and feet; soon he would be warm all over, and sleepy. His eyelids felt heavy, strange that they should be so heavy on an asteroid.

He wanted terribly to sleep.

There wasn't much room in the *Sirius*, the only privacy was gained by drawing curtains across your bunk. Men without psych training could get to hate each other on a voyage. Bo wondered if he would reach Luna hating Einar Lundgard.

The man was competent, a willing worker, tempering his cheerfulness with tact, always immaculate in the neat blue and white of the Fireball Line which made Bo feel doubly sloppy in his own old gray coverall. He was a fine conversationalist with an enormous stock of reminiscence and ideas, witty above a certain passion of belief. It seemed as if he and Valeria were always talking, animated voices like a sound of life over the mechanical ship-murmurs, while Bo sat dumbly in a corner wishing he could think of something to say.

The trouble was, in spite of all his efforts, he was doing a cometary dive into another bad case of one-sided love. When she spoke in that husky voice of hers, gray gleam of eyes under hair that floated flaming in null-gee, the beauty he saw in her was like pain. And she was always around. It couldn't be helped. Once they had gone into free fall he could only polish so much metal and tinker with so many appliances; after that they were crowded together in a long waiting.

—"And why were you all alone in the Belt?" asked Lundgard. "In spite of all the romantic stories about the wild free life of the rockhound, it's the dullest place in the System."

"Not to me," she smiled. "I was working. There were experiments to be done, factors to be measured, away from solar radiation. There are always ions around inside the orbit of Mars to jamble up a delicate apparatus."

Bo sat quiet, trying to keep his eyes off her. She looked good in shorts and half-cape. Too good.

"It's something to do with power beam-

ing, isn't it?" Lundgard's handsome face creased in a frown. "Afraid I don't quite understand. They've been beaming power on the planets for a long time now."

"So they have," she nodded. "What we're after is an interplanetary power beam. And we've got it." She gestured to the baggage rack and a thick trunk full of papers she had put there. "That's it. The basic circuits, factors, and constants. Any competent engineer could draw up a design from them."

"Hmmm . . . precision work, eh?"

"Obviously! It was hard enough to do on, say, Earth—you need a *really* tight beam in just the right frequencies, a feedback signal to direct each beam at the desired outlet, relay stations—oh, yes, it was a ten-year research project before they could even think about building. An interplanetary beam has all those problems plus a number of its own. You have to get the dispersion down to a figure so low it hardly seems possible. You can't use feedback because of the time lag, so the beams have to be aimed *exactly* right—and the planets are always moving, at miles per second. An error of one degree would throw your beam almost two million miles off in crossing one A. U. And besides being so precise, the beam has to carry a begawatt at least to be worth the trouble. The problem looked insoluble till someone in the Order of Planetary Engineers came up with an idea for a trick control circuit hooked into a special computer. My lab's been working together with the Order on it, and I was making certain final determinations for them. It's finished now . . . twelve years of work and we're done." She laughed. "Except for building the stations and getting the bugs out!"

LUNDGARD cocked an oddly sardonic brow. "And what do you hope for from it?" he asked. "What have the psychotechs decided to do with this thing?"

"Isn't it obvious?" she cried. "Power! Nuclear fuel is getting scarcer every day, and civilization is finished if we can't find another energy source. The sun is pouring out more than we'll ever need, but sheer distance dilutes it below a useful level by the time it gets to Venus.

"We'll build stations on the hot side of Mercury. Orbital stations can relay. We can

get the beams as far out as Mars without too much dispersion. It'll bring down the rising price of atomic energy, which is making all other prices rise, and stretch our supply of fissionables for centuries more. No more fuel worries, no more Martians freezing to death because a converter fails, no more clan feuds on Venus starting over uranium beds—" The excited flush on her cheeks was lovely to look at.

Lundgard shook his head. There was a sadness in his smile. "You're a true child of the New Enlightenment," he said. "Reason will solve everything. Science will find a cure for all our ills. Give man a cheap energy source and leave him forever happy. It won't work, you know."

Something like anger crossed her eyes. "What are you?" she asked. "A Humanist?"

"Yes," said Lundgard quietly.

Bo started. He'd known about the anti-psychotechnic movement which was growing on Earth, seen a few of its adherents, but—

"I never thought a spaceman would be a Humanist," he stammered.

Lundgard shrugged wryly. "Don't be afraid. I don't eat babies. I don't even get hysterics in an argument. All I've done is use the scientific method, observing the world without preconceptions, and learned by it that the scientific method doesn't have all the answers."

"Instead," said Valeria scornfully, "we should all go back to church and pray for what we want rather than working for it."

"Not at all," said Lundgard mildly. "The New Enlightenment is—or was, because it's dying—a very natural state of mind. Here Earth had come out of the World Wars, racked and ruined, starving and chaotic, and all because of unbridled ideology. So the physical scientists produced goods and machines and conquered the planets; the biologists found new food sources and new cures for disease; the psychotechs built up their knowledge to a point where the socio-economic unity could really be planned and the plan worked. Man was unified, war had been sunk to an occasional small 'police action,' people were eating and had comfort and security—all through applied, working science. Naturally they came to believe reason would solve their remaining problems. But this faith in reason was itself an emotional

reaction from the preceding age of unreason.

"Well, we've had a century of enlightenment now, and it has created its own troubles which it cannot solve. No age can handle the difficulties it raises for itself; that's left to the next era. There are practical problems arising, and no matter how desperately the psychotechs work they aren't succeeding with them."

"What problems?" asked Bo, feeling a little bewildered.

"Man, don't you ever see a newscast?" challenged Lundgard. The Second Industrial Revolution, millions of people thrown out of work by the new automata. They aren't going hungry, but they are displaced and bitter. The economic center of Earth is shifting to Asia, the political power with it, and hundreds of millions of Asians are skeptical aboard this antiseptic New Order the West has been bringing them: cultural resistance, and not all the psychotechnic propaganda in the System can shake it off. The men of Mars, Venus, the Belt, the Jovian moons are developing their own civilizations—inevitably, in alien environments; their own ways of living and thinking, which just don't fit into the neat scheme of an Earth-dominated Solar Union. The psychotechs themselves are being driven to oligarchic, unconstitutional acts; they have no choice, but it's making them enemies.

"And then there's the normal human energy and drive. Man can only be safe and sane and secure for so long, then he reacts. This New Enlightenment is really a decadent age, a period where an exhausted civilization has been resting under a holy status quo. It can't last. Man always wants something new."

"You Humanists talk a lot about 'man's right to variability,'" said Valeria. "If you really carry off that revolution your writings advocate you'll just trade one power group for another—and more fanatic, less lawful, than the present one."

"Not necessarily," said Lundgard. "After all, the Union will probably break up. It can't last forever. All we want to do is hasten the day because we feel that it's outlived its usefulness."

Bo shook his head. "I can't see it," he said heavily. "I just can't see it. All those people—the Lunarites, the violent clansmen on

Venus, the stiff correct Martians, the asteroid rockhounds, even those mysterious Jovians—they all came from Earth. It was Earth's help that made their planets habitable. We're all men, all one race."

"A fiction," said Lundgard. "The human race is a fiction. There are only small groups with their own conflicting interests."

"And if those conflicts are allowed to break into war—" said Valeria. "Do you know what a lithium bomb can do?"

There was a reckless gleam in Lundgard's eyes. "If a period of interplanetary wars is necessary, let's get it over with," he answered. "Enough men will survive to build something better. This age has gotten stale. It's petrifying. There have been plenty of shake-ups in history—the fall of Rome, the Reformation, the Napoleonic Wars, the World Wars. It's been man's way of progress."

"I don't know about all those," said Bo slowly. "I just know I wouldn't want to live through such a time."

"You're soft," said Lundgard. "Down underneath you're soft." He laughed disarmingly. "Pardon me. I didn't mean anything personal. I'll never convince you and you'll never convince me, so let's keep it friendly. I hope you'll have some free time on Luna, Valeria. I know a little grill where they serve the best synthosteaks in the System."

"All right," she smiled. "It's a date."

Bo mumbled some excuse and went aft. He was still calling her Dr. McKittrick.

IV

YOU can't just lie here and let him come kill you.

There was a picture behind his eyes; he didn't know if it was a dream or a long buried memory. He stood under an aspen which quivered and rustled as if it laughed to itself softly, softly, when the wind embraced it. And the wind was blowing up a red granite slope, wild and salt from the Sound, and there were towering clouds lifting over Denmark to the west. The sunlight rained and streamed through aspen leaves, broken, shaken, falling in spatters against the earth, and he, Bo Jonsson, laughed with the wind and the tree and the far watery glitter of the Sound.

He opened his eyes, wearily, like an old man. Orion was marching past, and there was a blaze on crags five miles off which told of the rising sun. The asteroid spun swiftly; he had been here for many of its days now, and each day burdened him like a year.

Got to get out of here, he knew.

He sat up, pain tearing along his furrowed breast. Somehow he had kept the wrench with him, he stared at it in a dull wonder.

Where to go, where to hide, what to do?

Thirst nagged him. Slowly he uncoiled the tube which led from the electrically heated canteen welded to his suit, screwed its end into the helmet nipple, thumbed down the clamp which closed it, and sucked hard. It helped a little.

He dragged himself to his feet and stood swaying, only the near-weightlessness kept him erect. Turning his head in its transparent cage, he saw the sun rise, and bright spots danced before him when he looked away.

His vision cleared, but for a moment he thought the shadow lifting over a nearby ridge was a wisp of unconsciousness. Then he made out the bulky black-painted edge of it, gigantic against the Milky Way, and it was Lundgard, moving unhurriedly up to kill him.

A dark laughter was in his radio ear-phones. "Take it easy, Bo. I'll be there in a minute."

He backed away, his heart a sudden thunder, looking for a place to hide. Down! Get down and don't stand where he can see you! He crouched as much as the armor would allow and broke into a bounding run.

A slug spat broken stone near his feet. The powdery dust hung for minutes before settling. Breath rattled in his throat. He saw the lip of a meteoric crater and dove.

Crouching there, he heard Lundgard's voice again: "You're somewhere near. Why not come out and finish it now?"

The radio was non-directional, so he snapped back: "A gun against a monkey wrench."

Lundgard's coolness broke a little; there was almost a puzzled note: "I hate to do this. Why can't you be reasonable? I don't want to kill you."

"The trouble," said Bo husily, "is that I want to kill you."

"Behold the man of the New Enlightenment!" Bo could imagine Lundgard's grin. It would be tight, and there would be sweat on the lean face, but the amusement was genuine. Didn't you believe sweet reasonableness could solve everything? This is only the beginning, Bo, just a small preliminary hint that the age of reason is dying. I've already converted you to my way of thinking, by the very fact you're fighting me. Why not admit it?"

Bo shook his head—futile gesture, looked in darkness where he lay. There was a frosty blaze of stars when he looked up.

It was more than himself and Johnny Malone, more even than the principle of the thing and the catastrophe to all men which Lundgard's victory meant. There was something deep and primitive which would not let him surrender, even in the teeth of annihilation. Valeria's image swayed before him.

Lundgard was moving around, peering over the shadowy tumble of blackened rock in search of any trace. There was a magnetic rifle in his hands. Bo strained his helmet to the crater floor, trying to hear ground vibrations, but there was nothing. He didn't know where Lundgard was, only that he was very near.

Blindly, he bunched his legs and sprang out of the pit.

THEY found the asteroid where Valeria had left her recording instruments. It was a tiny drifting fragment of a world which had never been born, turning endlessly between the constellations; the *Sirius* moored fast with grapples, and Valeria donned a spacesuit and went out to get her apparatus. Lundgard accompanied her. As there was only work for two, Bo stayed behind.

He slumped for a while in the pilot chair, letting his mind pace through a circle of futility. Valeria, Valeria, Valeria—O strong and fair and never to be forgotten, would he ever see her again after they made Luna?

This won't do, he told himself dully. I should at least keep busy. Thank God for work.

He wasn't much of a thinker, he knew that, but he had cleverness in his hands. It

was satisfying to watch a machine come right under his tools. Working, he could see the falseness of Lundgard's philosophy. The man could quote history all he wanted; weave a glittering circle of logic around Bo's awkward brain, but it didn't change facts. Maybe this century was headed for trouble; maybe psychotechnic government was only another human self-limitation and should be changed for something else; nevertheless, the truth remained that most men were workers who wished no more than peace in which to create as best they could. All the high ideals in the universe weren't worth breaking the Union for and smashing the work of human hands in a single burst of annihilating flame.

I can feel it, down inside me. But why can't I say it?

He got up and went over to the baggage rack, remembering that Lundgard had dozens of book-reels along and that reading would help him not to think about what he could never have.

On a planet Bo would not have dreamed of helping himself without asking first. But custom is different in space, where there is no privacy and men must be a unit if they are to survive. He was faintly surprised to see that Lundgard's personal suitcase was locked; but it would be hours, probably, before the owner got back: dismantling a recorder setup took time. A long time, in which to talk and laugh with Valeria. In the chill spatial radiance, her hair would be like frosty fire.

Casually, Bo stooped across to Lundgard's sack-hammock and took his key ring off the hook. He opened the suitcase and lifted out some of the reels in search of a promising title.

Underneath them were neatly folded clothes, Fireball uniforms and fancy dress pajamas. A tartan edge stuck out from below, and Bo lifted a coat to see what clan that was. Probably a souvenir of Lundgard's Venusian stay—

Next to the kilt was a box which he recognized. L-masks came in such boxes.

How the idea came to him, he did not know. He stood there for minutes, looking at the box without seeing it. The ship was very quiet around him. He had a sudden feeling that the walls were closing in.

When he opened the box, his hands shook, and there was sweat trickling along his ribs.

The mask was of the latest type, meant to fit over the head, snug around the cheeks and mouth and jaws. It was like a second skin, reflecting expression, not to be told from a real face. Bo saw the craggy nose and the shock of dark hair, limp now, but—

Suddenly he was back on Achilles, with riot roaring around him and Johnny Malone's body in his arms.

No wonder they never found that Venusian. There never was any.

Bo felt a dim shock when he looked at the chronometer. Only five minutes had gone by while he stood there. Only five minutes to turn the cosmos inside out.

Very slowly and carefully he repacked the suitcase and put it in the rack and sat down to think.

What to do?

Accuse Lundgard to his face—no, the man undoubtedly carried that needler. And there was Valeria to think of. A ricocheting dart, a scratch on her, no! It took Bo a long time to decide; his brain seemed viscous. When he looked out of a port to the indifferent stars, he shuddered.

THEY came back, shedding their spacesuits in the airlock; frost whitened the armor as moisture condensed on chilled surfaces. The metal seemed to breathe cold. Valeria went efficiently to work, stowing the boxed instruments as carefully as if they were her children. There was a laughter on her lips which turned Bo's heart around inside him.

Lundgard leaned over the tiny desk where he sat. "What y' doing?" he asked.

"Recalculating our orbit to Luna," said Bo. "I want to go slow for a few million miles before going up to hyperbolic speed."

Why? It'll add days to the trip, and the fuel—

"I . . . I'm afraid we might barge into Swarm 770. It's supposed to be near here now and, uh, the positions of those things are never known for sure . . . perturbations . . ." Bo's mouth felt dry.

"You've got a megamile of safety margin or your orbit would never have been approved," argued Lundgard.

"Hell damn it, I'm the captain!" yelled Bo.

"All right, all right . . . take it easy, skipper." Lundgard shot a humorous glance at Valeria. "I certainly don't mind a few extra days in . . . the present company."

She smiled at him. Bo felt ill.

His excuse was thin; if Lundgard thought to check the ephemeris, it would fall to ruin. But he couldn't tell the real reason.

An iron-drive ship does not need to drift along the economical Hohmann "A" orbit of the big freighters; it can build up such furious speed that the sun will swing it along a hyperbola rather than an ellipse, and can still brake that speed near its destination. But the critical stage of acceleration has to be just right, or there will not be enough fuel to stop completely; the ship will be pulled into a cometary orbit and run helpless, the crew probably starving before a rescue vessel can locate them. Bo dared not risk the trouble exploding at full drive; he would drift along, capture and bind Lundgard at the first chance, and then head for Earth. He could handle the *Sirius* alone even if it was illegal; he could not handle her if he had to fight simultaneously.

His knuckles were white on the controls as he loosed the grapples and nudged away from the asteroid with a whisper of power. After a few minutes of low acceleration, he cut the rockets, checked position and velocity, and nodded. "On orbit," he said mechanically. "It's your turn to cook, Ei . . . Einar."

Lundgard swooped easily through the air into the cubbyhole which served for a galley. Cooking in free fall is an art which not all spacemen master, but he could—his meals were even good. Bo felt a helpless kind of rage at his own clumsy efforts.

He crouched in midair, dark of mind, a leg hooked around a stanchion to keep from drifting.

When someone touched him, his heart jumped and he whirled around.

"What's the matter, Bo?" asked Valeria. "You look like doomsday."

"I . . . I . . ." He gulped noisily and twisted his mouth into a smile. Just feeling a little off.

"It's more than that, I think." Her eyes were grave. "You've seemed so unhappy the

whole trip. Is there anything I can do to help?

"Thanks . . . Dr. McKittrick . . . but—"

"Don't be so formal," she said, almost wistfully. "I don't bite. Too many men think I do. Can't we be friends?"

"With a thick-headed clinker like me?" His whisper was raw.

"Don't be silly. It takes brains to be a spaceman. I like a man who knows when to be quiet." She lowered her eyes, the lashes were long and sooty black. "There's something solid about you, something so few people seem to have these days. I wish you wouldn't go feeling so inferior."

At any other time it would have been a sunburst in him. Now he thought of death, and mumbled something and looked away. A hurt expression crossed her face. "I won't bother you," she said gently, and moved off.

The thing was to fall on Lundgard while he slept—

The radar alarm buzzed during a dinner in which Lundgard's flow of talk had battered vainly against silence and finally given up. Bo vaulted over to the control panel and checked. No red light glowed, and the autopilot wasn't whipping them out of danger, so they weren't on a collision course. But the object was getting close. Bo calculated it was an asteroid on an orbit almost parallel to their own, relative speed only a few feet per second; it would come within ten miles or so. In the magnifying periscope, it showed as a jagged dark cube, turning around itself and flashing hard glints of sunlight off mica beds—perhaps six miles square, all crags and cracks and fracture faces, heatless and lifeless and kindless.

V

LUNDGARD yawned elaborately after dinner. "Excuse," he said. "Unless somebody's for chess?" His hopeful glance met the grimness of Bo and the odd sadness of Valeria, and he shrugged. "All right, then. Pleasant dreams."

After ten minutes—*now!*

Bo uncoiled himself. "Valeria," he whispered, as if the name were holy.

"Yes?" She arched her brows expectantly.

"I can't stop to explain now. I've got to

do something dangerous. Get back aft of the gyro housing."

"What?"

"Get back!" Command blazed frantically in him. "And stay there, whatever happens."

Something like fear flickered in her eyes. It was a very long way to human help. Then she nodded, puzzled but with an obedience which held gallantry, and slipped out of sight behind the steel pillar.

Bo launched himself across the room in a single null-gee bound. One hand ripped aside Lundgard's curtain, the other got him by the throat.

What the hell—"

Lundgard exploded into life. His fist crashed against Bo's cheek. Bo held on with one hand and slugged with the other. Knuckles bounced on rubbery muscle. Lundgard's arm snaked for the tunic stretched on his bunk wall; his body came lithely out of the sack. Bo snatched for that wrist. Lundgard's free hand came around, edged out to slam him in the larynx.

Pain ripped through Bo. He let go and sailed across the room. Lundgard was pulling out his needler.

Bo hit the opposite wall and rebounded—not for the armed man, but for the control panel. Lundgard spat a dart at him. It burst on the viewport over his shoulder, and Bo caught the acrid whiff of poison. Then the converter was roaring to life and whining gyros spun the ship around.

Lundgard was hurled across the room. He collected himself, catlike, grabbed a stanchion, and raised the gun again. "I've got the drop," he said. "Get away from there or you're a dead man."

It was as if someone else had seized Bo's body. Decision was like lightning through him. He had tried to capture Lundgard, and failed, and venom crouched at his back. But the ship was pointed for the asteroid now, where it hung gloomily a dozen miles off, and the rockets were ready to spew.

"If you shoot me," said Bo, "I'll live just long enough to pour on the juice. We'll hit that rock and scatter from hell to breakfast."

Valeria emerged. Lundgard swung the needler to cover her. "Stay where you are!" he rapped.

"What's happening?" she said fearfully.

"I don't know," said Lundgard. "Bo's gun once attacked me."

Wrath boiled black in the pilot. He snarled, "You killed my partner. You must've been fixing to kill us too."

"What do you mean?" whispered Valeria.

"How should I know?" said Lundgard. "He's jumped his orbit, that's all. Look, Bo, be reasonable. Get away from that panel—"

"Look in his suitcase, Valeria." Bo forced the words out of a tautened throat. "A Venusian shot my partner. You'll find his face and his clothes in Lundgard's things. I'd know that face in the middle of the sun."

She hung for a long while, not moving. Bo couldn't see her. His eyes were nailed to the asteroid, keeping the ship's nose pointed at it.

"Is that true, Einar?" she asked finally.

"No," said. "Of course not. I do have Venusian clothes and a mask, but—"

Then why are you keeping me covered too?"

Lundgard didn't answer at once. The only noise was the murmur of machinery and the dense breathing of three pairs of lungs. Then his laugh jarred forth.

"All right," he said. "I hadn't meant it to come yet, or to come this way, but all right."

"Why did you kill Johnny?" Tears stung Bo's eyes. He never hurt you."

"It was necessary." Lundgard's mouth twitched. "But you see, we knew you were going to Achilles to pick up Valeria and her data. We needed to get a man aboard your ship, to take over when her orbit brought her close to our asteroid base. You've forced my hand—I wasn't going to capture you for days yet. I sabotaged the *Drake's* fuel tanks to get myself stranded there, and shot your friend to get his berth. I'm sorry."

"Why?" Horror rode Valeria's voice.

"I'm a Humanist. I've never made a secret of that. What our secret is, is that some of us aren't content just to talk revolution. We want to give this rotten, over-mechanized society the shove that will bring on its end. We've built up a small force, not much as yet, not enough to accomplish anything lasting. But if we had a solar power beam it would make a big difference. It could be adapted to direct military uses, as well as

supplying energy to our machines. A lens effect, a concentration of solar radiation strong enough to burn. Well, it seems worth trying."

"And what do you intend for us?"

"You'll have to be kept prisoners for a while, of course," said Lundgard. "It won't be onerous. We aren't beasts."

"No," said Bo. "Just murderers."

"Save the dramatics," snapped Lundgard. "I have the gun. Get away from those controls."

Bo shook his head. There was a wild hammering in his breast, but his voice surprised him with steadiness: "No. I've got the upper hand. I can kill you if you move. Yell if he tries anything, Valeria."

Lundgard's eyes challenged her. "Do you want to die?" he asked.

Her head lifted. "No," she said, "but I'm not afraid to. Go ahead if you must, Bo. It's all right."

BO FELT cold. He knew he wouldn't. He was bluffing. In the final showdown he could not crash her. He had seen too many withered space drained mummies in his time. But maybe Lundgard didn't realize that.

"Give up," he said. "You can't gain a damn thing. I'm not going to see a billion people burned alive just to save our necks. Make a bargain for your life."

"No," said Lundgard with a curious gentleness. "I have my own brand of honor. I'm not going to surrender to you. You can't sit there forever."

Impasse. The ship floated through eternal silence while they waited.

"All right," said Bo. "I'll fight you for the power beam."

How's that?"

"I can throw this ship into orbit around the asteroid. We can go down there and settle the thing between us. The winner can jump up here again with the help of a jet of tanked air. The lump hasn't got much gravity."

Lundgard hesitated. "And how do I know you'll keep your end of the bargain?" he asked. "You could let me go through the airlock, then close it and blast off."

Bo had had some such thought, but he might have known it wouldn't work. "What

do you suggest?" he countered, never taking his eyes off the planetoid. "Remember, I don't trust you either."

Lundgard laughed suddenly, a hard yelping bark. "I know! Valeria, go aft and remove all the control-rod links and spares. Bring them back here. I'll go out first, taking half of them with me, and Bo can follow with the other half. He'll have to."

"I—no! I won't," she whispered. "I can't let you—"

"Go ahead and do it," said Bo. He felt a sudden vast weariness. It's the only way we can break this deadlock."

She wept as she went toward the engine room.

Lundgard's thought was good. Without linked control-rods, the converter couldn't operate five minutes, it would flare up and melt itself and kill everyone aboard in a flood of radiation. Whoever won the duel could quickly re-install the necessary parts.

There was a waiting silence. At last Lundgard said, almost abstractedly: "Holmgang. Do you know what that means, Bo?"

"No."

"You ought to. It was a custom of our ancestors back in the early Middle Ages—the Viking time. Two men would go off to a little island, a holm, to settle their differences; one would come back. I never thought it could happen out here." He chuckled bleakly. "Valkyries in spacesuits?"

The girl came back with the links tied in two bundles. Lundgard counted them and nodded. "All right." He seemed strangely calm, an easy assurance lay over him like armor. Bo's fear was cold in his belly, and Valeria wept still with a helpless horror.

The pilot used a safe two minutes of low blast to edge up to the asteroid, "I'll go into the airlock and put on my spacesuit," said Lundgard. "Then I'll jump down and you can put the ship in orbit. Don't try anything while I'm changing, because I'll keep this needler handy."

"It won't work against a spacesuit," said Bo.

Lundgard laughed. "I know," he said. He kissed his hand to Valeria and backed into the lock chamber. The outer valve closed behind him.

"Bo!" Valeria grabbed the pilot by the shoulder, and he looked around into her

face. "You can't go out there, I won't let you, I—"

"If I don't," he said tonelessly, "we'll orbit around here till we starve."

"But you could be killed!"

"I hope not. For your sake, mostly, I hope not," he said awkwardly. "But he won't have any more weapon than me, just a monkey wrench." There was a metal tube welded to the leg of each suit for holding tools; wrenches, the most commonly used, were simply left there as a rule. "I'm bigger than he is."

"But—" She laid her head on his breast and shuddered with crying. He tried to comfort her.

"All right," he said at last. "All right. Lundgard must be through. I'd better get started."

"Leave him!" she blazed. "His air won't last many hours. We can wait."

"And when he sees he's been tricked, you think he won't wreck those links? No. There's no way out."

It was as if all his life he had walked on a road which had no turnings, which led inevitably to this moment.

He made some careful calculations from the instrument readings, physical constants of the asteroid, and used another minute's maneuvering to assume orbital velocity. Alarm lights blinked angry eyes at him, the converter was heating up. No more traveling till the links were restored.

Bo floated from his chair toward the lock. Good-bye, Valeria," he said, feeling the bloodless weakness of words. "I hope it won't be for long."

She threw her arms about him and kissed him. The taste of tears was still on his lips when he had dogged down his helmet.

Opening the outer valve he moved forth, magnetic boots clamping to the hull. A gulf of stars yawned around him, a cloudy halo about his head. The stillness was smothering.

When he was "over" the asteroid he gauged his position with a practiced eye and jumped free. Falling, he thought mostly of Valeria.

As he landed he looked around. No sign of Lundgard. The man could be anywhere in these square miles of cosmic wreckage. He spoke tentatively into his radio, in case

Lundgard should be within the horizon: "Hello, are you there?"

"Yes. I'm coming." There was a sharp cruel note of laughter. "Sorry to play this dirty, but there are bigger issues at stake than you or me. I've kept a rifle in my tool-tube all the time . . . just in case. Good-bye, Bo."

A slug smashed into the pinnacle behind him. Bo turned and ran.

VI

AS HE rose over the lip of the crater, his head swung, seeking his enemy. There!

It was almost a reflex which brought his arm back and sent the wrench hurtling across the few yards between. Before it had struck, Bo's feet lashed against the pit edge, and the wrenched him toward Lundgard.

Spacemen have to be good at throwing things. The wrench hit the lifted rifle in a soundless shiver of metal, tore it loose from an insecure gauntleted grasp and sent it spinning into shadow. Lundgard yelled, spun on his heel, and dove after it. Then the flying body of Bo Jonsson struck him.

Even in low-gee, matter has all its inertia. The impact rang and boomed within their armor, they swayed and fell to the ground, locking arms and hammering futilely at helmets. Rolling over, Bo got on top, his hands closed on Lundgard's throat—where the throat should have been, but plastic and alloy held fast; instinct had betrayed him.

Lundgard snarled, doubled his legs and kicked. Bo was sent staggering back. Lundgard crawled erect and turned to look for the rifle. Bo couldn't see it either in the near-solid blackness where no light fell, but his wrench lay as a dark gleam. He sprang for that, closed a hand on it, bounced up, and rushed at Lundgard. A swing shocked his own muscles with its force, and Lundgard lurched.

Bo moved in on him. Lundgard reached into his tool-tube and drew out his own wrench. He circled, his panting hoarse in Bo's earphones.

"This . . . is the way . . . it was supposed to be," said Bo.

He jumped in, his weapon whirling down to shiver again on the other helmet. Lundgard shook a dazed head and countered. The

impact roared and echoed in Bo's helmet, on into his skull. He smashed heavily. Lundgard's lifted wrench parried the blow, it slid off. Like a fencer, Lundgard snaked his shaft in and the reverberations were deafening.

Bo braced himself and smote with all his power. The hit sang back through iron and alloy, into his own bones. Lundgard staggered a little, hunched himself and struck in return.

They stood with feet braced apart, trading fury, a metal rain on shivering plastic. The stuff was almost unbreakable, but not quite, not for long when such violence dinned on it. Bo felt a lifting wild glee, something savage he had never known before leaped up in him and he bellowed. He was stronger, he could hit harder. Lundgard's helmet would break first!

The Humanist retreated, using his wrench like a sword, stopping the force of blows without trying to deal more of his own. His left hand fumbled at his side. Bo hardly noticed. He was pushing in, hewing, hewing. Again the shrunken sun rose, to flash hard light off his club.

Lundgard grinned, his face barely visible as highlight and shadow behind the plastic. His raised tool turned one hit, it slipped along his arm to rap his flank. Bo twisted his arm around, beat the other wrench aside for a moment, and landed a crack like a thunderbolt.

Then Lundgard had his drinking hose free, pointing in his left hand. He thumbed down the clamp, exposing water at fifty degrees to naked space.

It rushed forth, driven by its own vapor pressure, a stream like a lance in the wan sunshine. When it hit Bo's helmet, most of it boiled off . . . cooling the rest, which froze instantly.

Blindness clamped down on Bo. He leaped away, cursing, the front of his helmet so frosted he could not see before him. Lundgard bounced around, playing the hose on him. Through the rime-coat, Bo could make out only a grayness.

He pawed at it, trying to wipe it off, knowing that Lundgard was using this captured minute to look for the rifle. As he got some of the ice loose, he heard a sharp yell of victory—found!

Turning, he ran again.

Over that ridge! Down on your belly! A slug pocked the stone above him. Rolling over, he got to his feet and bounded off toward a steep rise, still wiping blindness off his helmet. But he could not wipe the bitter vomit taste of defeat out of his mouth.

His breathing was a file that raked in his throat. Heart and lungs were ready to tear loose, and there was a cold knot in his guts. Fleeting up the high, ragged slope, he sobbed out his rage at himself and his own stupidity.

At the top of the hill he threw himself to the ground and looked down again over a low wall of basalt. It was hard to see if anything moved down in that valley of night. Then the sun threw a broken gleam off polished metal, the rifle barrel, and he saw Einar Lundgard walking around, looking for him.

The voice came dim in his earphones. "Why don't you give up, Bo? I tell you, I don't want to kill you."

"Yeh." Bo panted wearily. "I'm sure."

"Well, you can never tell," said Lundgard mildly. "It would be rather a nuisance to have to keep not only the fair Valeria, but you, tied up all the way to base. Still, if you'll surrender by the time I've counted ten—"

"Look here," said Bo desperately, "I've got half the links. If you don't give up I'll hammer 'em all flat and let you starve."

"And Valeria?" The voice jeered at him. He knew his secret was read. "I shouldn't have let you bluff me in the first place. It won't happen a second time. All right: one, two, three—"

Bo could get off this asteroid with no more than the power of his own legs; a few jets from the emergency blow valve at the bottom of an air tank would correct his flight as needed to bring him back to the *Sirius*. He wanted to get up there; and inside warm walls, and take Valeria in his hands and never let her go again. He wanted to live.

"—six, seven, eight—"

He looked at his gauges. A lot of oxy-helium mixture was gone from the tanks, but they were big and there was still several atmospheres' pressure in each. A couple of hours' life. If he didn't exert himself too

much. They screwed directly into valves in the back of his armor, and—

"—ten. All right, Bo." Lundgard started moving up the slope, light and graceful as a bird. It was wide and open, no place to hide and sneak up behind him.

FIGURES reeled through Bo's mind, senselessly. Mass of the asteroid, effective radius, escape velocity only a few feet per second, and he was already on one of the highest points. Brains! he thought with a shattering sorrow. A lot of good mine have done me!

He prepared to back down the other side of the hill, run as well as he could, as long as he could, until a bullet splashed his blood or suffocation thickened it. But I want to fight! he thought through a gulp of tears. I want to stand up and fight!

Orbital velocity equals escape velocity divided by the square root of two.

For a moment he lay there, rigid, and his eyes stared at death walking up the slope but did not see it.

Then, in a crazy blur of motion, he brought his wrench around, closed it on a nut at one side, and turned.

The right hand air tank unscrewed easily. He held it in his hands, a three foot cylinder, blind while calculation raced through his head. What would the centrifugal and Coriolis forces be? It was the roughest sort of estimate. He had neither time nor data, but—

Lundgard was taking it easy, stopping to examine each patch of shadow thrown by some gaunt crag, each meteor scar where a man might hide. It would take him several minutes to reach the hilltop.

Bo clutched the loosened tank in his arms, throwing one leg around it to make sure, and faced away from Lundgard. He hefted himself, as if his body were a machine he must use. Then, carefully, he jumped off the top of the hill.

It was birdlike, dreamlike, thus to soar noiseless over iron desolation. The sun fell behind him. A spearhead pinnacle clawed after his feet. The Southern Cross flamed in his eyes.

Downward—get rid of that downward component of velocity. He twisted the tank, pointing it toward the surface, and cautious—

ly opened the blow valve with his free hand. Only a moment's exhaust, everything gauged by eye. Did he have an orbit now?

The ground dropped sharply off to infinity, and he saw stars under the keel of the world. He was still going out, away. Maybe he had miscalculated his jump, exceeded escape velocity after all, and was headed for a long cold spin toward Jupiter. It would take all his compressed air to correct such a mistake.

Sweat prickled in his armpits. He locked his teeth and refused to open the valve again.

It was like endless falling, but he couldn't yet be sure if the fall was toward the asteroid or the stars. The rock spun past him. Another face came into view. Yes, by all idiot gods, its gravity was pulling him around!

He skimmed low over the bleakness of it, seeing darkness and starlit death sliding beneath him. Another crag loomed suddenly in his path, and he wondered in a harsh clutch of fear if he was going to crash. Then it ghosted by, a foot from his flying body. He thought he could almost sense the chill of it.

He was a moon now, a satellite skimming low above the airless surface of his own midget world. The fracture plain where Lundgard had shot at him went by, and he braced himself. Up around the tiny planet, and there was the hill he had left, stark against Sagittarius. He saw Lundgard, standing on its heights and looking the way he had gone. Carefully, he aimed the tank and gave himself another small blast to correct his path. There was no noise to betray him, the asteroid was a grave where all sound was long buried and frozen.

He flattened, holding his body parallel to the tank in his arms. One hand still gripped the wrench, the other reached to open the

blow valve wide.

The surge almost tore him loose. He had a careening lunatic moment of flight in which the roar of escaping gas boiled through his armor and he clung like a troll to a runaway witch's broom. The sun was blinding on one side of him.

He struck Lundgard with an impact of velocity and inertia which sent him spinning down the hill. Bo hit the ground, recoiled, and sprang after his enemy. Lundgard was still rolling. As Bo approached, he came to a halt, lifted his rifle dazedly, and had it knocked loose with a single blow of the wrench.

Lundgard crawled to his feet while Bo picked up the rifle and threw it off the asteroid. "Why did you do that?"

"I don't know," said Bo. "I should just shoot you down, but I want you to surrender."

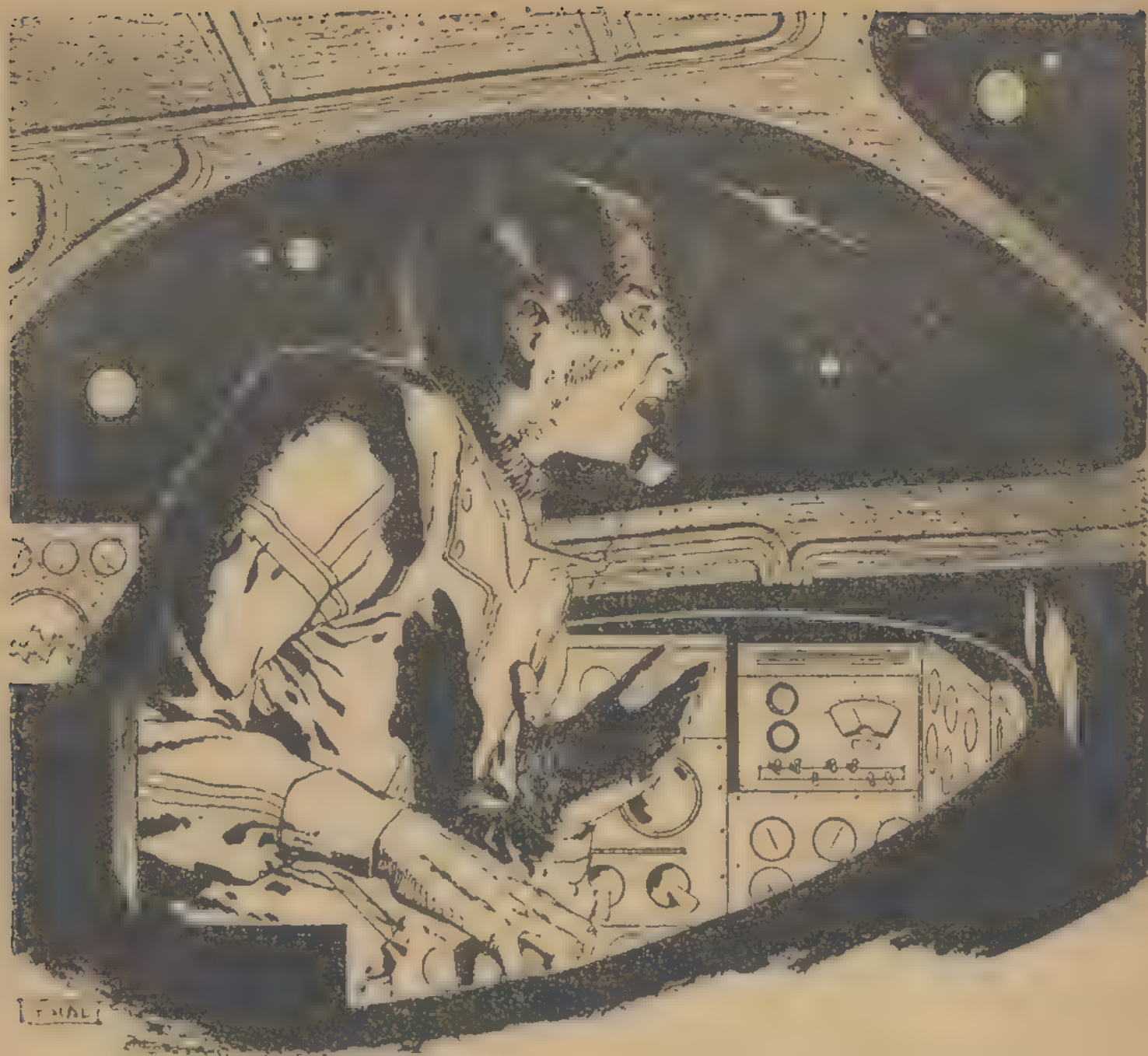
Lundgard drew his wrench. "No," he said.

"All right," said Bo. "It won't take long."

When he got up to the *Sirius*, using a tank Lundgard would never need, Valeria had armed herself with a kitchen knife. "It wouldn't have done much good," he said when he came through the airlock. She fell into his arms, sobbing, and he tried to comfort her. "It's all over. All taken care of. We can go home now."

He himself was badly in need of consolation. The inquiry on Earth would clear him, of course, but he would always have to live with the memory of a man stretched dead under a wintry sky. He went aft and replaced the links. When he came back, Valeria had recovered herself, but as she watched his methodical preparations and listened to what he had to tell, there was that in her eyes which he hardly dared believe.

Not him. Not a big dumb slob like him.



ONCE A STARMAN

By JOE L. HENSLEY

The snares of space were incalculable, Lou Argonne learned. Lightning speeds, immense distances, Stygian blackness, rushing stars, flaming meteors . . . all piled up inexorably to impale frail Earthman on the spears of vivid imagination. And there was no road back.

"YOU docs out here are a funny lot," Lou Argonne said.

The man who sat beside him on the plastic bench was silent for a long moment and Lou thought it was very like the man to take much time to consider before saying anything.

Doctor Earl looked up into the gray Martian sky which was visible through the

plastic dome that covered the hospital and the hangars for its rocket port.

"Why do you say that?" he asked. "On Earth I might make more money, but it would not be the same. My existence out here is comfortable and I feel that I am doing something important. Men have to go to the stars, and other men, like myself, have to treat them when they are ill."

Lou gave the doctor a somber look. "John Canar should not have invented the light-drive, Doctor Earl. Men weren't meant for the stars—not yet. We're too young a race. We haven't matured. An Andromedan told me that right before I went, before I . . ."

"Before you went off your head, Lou?" Doctor Earl said, his voice lighter. "Don't try to hide it from yourself, because that's just what happened. You went crazy, to put it in simple words. Now you've got to learn to live with it, to know it can happen, just the same as a man with ulcers or diabetes has got to learn to live with that. And don't blame your trouble on John Canar, or Andromedan philosophy. If Canar hadn't invented the light-drive then someone else would have. And from what I've read, the Andromedans don't think Genus Homo good for much of anything." He looked down at his watch and arose brusquely. "I've got an appointment. See you tomorrow."

After the footsteps had died away Lou looked back up at the sky. There was no feeling now. It looked only cool and gray and clean. Even with night drawing on swiftly it did not resemble the blackness of space.

But at first it had. Even the distances across the wide rooms of the hospital had been intolerable and looking out into the flat grayness of the sky had doubled him up, clutching the bed rails for support.

They had been kind, all of them, doctors and nurses and other patients. Lou had been surprised how quickly he got over the first feelings now that there was a solidity to cling to; how soon he was able to look out over the flat Martian landscape without that awful vertigo.

But he knew that he would never forget those last few hours out from Mars and the hospital, when he had felt his heart begin to slow toward the final stopping. Strapped down, able to partially know what had happened, with the intravenous feeding bottle gurgling above him. He had hated and cursed John Canar, the light-drive inventor, and every man who had ever gone out into the snare that was space. And feeling the heart, that should have pounded wildly at the fear within him—begin to slow.

It had been one of those one-in-a-

thousand chances. For a millisecond the "infallible" screens had gone down on the last leg of the Andromeda run. Tiny bits of cosmic debris had ripped through the ship. Lou, on the bridge, had looked down at his hand in sudden pain. The tip of his right index finger was mutilated and a stream of blood jetted out. Other smaller pieces had torn through his body at faster-than-light speeds. He had grabbed at the finger and suddenly seen the usually friendly stars outside the observation window. The fear had come then. Somehow those stars seemed to glare malevolently at him. He had begun to scream.

That was the last he remembered until he came to in the ship's tiny sickbay.

And now, here he was, at this great hospital on Mars.

IN THE corridors soft light shone down from cunningly concealed apertures in the walls. It gave the illusion of an Earth day, which is what it was meant to do. For the hospital was of Earth, situated out here partly because the very sick could better stand the strain of landing against its lesser gravity. There were other reasons: Earth had little time for its space-injured in these halcyon days of expanding light-drive empire.

Lou paused in the corridor. Through the blue-glassed window he could see the red basketball that was the sun. How far away was it? At a million miles a second, low speed for the light-drive, a couple of minutes. A touch of the old sickness came; he hurried on past the window.

It was a phobia—a fancy name. It was a fear of too fast speeds and too immense distances and of the blackness that crushed, and the rushing stars that impaled one on the spears of imagination.

It could happen any place. Once, when Lou was younger, and third watch officer of a freighter, he had seen an epidemic of it. The atomic motors had broken down and they had been sucked irresistibly toward something, probably a dwarf star. The atomics had been fixed, finally, but three men of the crew had lost themselves to the moment of tension. One had cried; all night he had cried. Lou, in the cabin next to the dispensary, had heard him all of the way

back to Mars and that had been many days. No words, only the sobbing that was terrifying in its aloneness.

Doctor Earl had told him that some recovered and went back out into the holes between the stars. That they were better men because they had learned to live with the fear, to rationalize it away. Very few of them had recurrences, he said.

But Lou supposed that more of them were like Johnny, the old man who slept in Lou's "up" ward and could not go past a window. The old man had been here so long that he had become as silent as the smooth machine that was the hospital. He never smiled and he said very little to anyone, though Lou remembered that he had been kind when Lou first came into the ward. But now he had retreated back into the soft shell of silence. Sometimes, at night, Lou would coax the old man into a game of checkers, but it was always a silent, listless game which Lou invariably won.

LOU hesitated at the door and then went in.

Doctor Earl was waiting for him in the examining room. Lou sat down and took one of the proffered cigarettes.

"Lou," the doctor said seriously, "you have a big decision ahead of you and there are two alternatives that you can take. I'm going to lay them out for you and tell you what chances you can expect for yourself in each one. The decision is up to you, but I will ask you not to make it today—not even if you're sure. Think about it tonight." He waved a hand through the air. "Take even longer if you want and come and see me when you've made up your mind."

Lou leaned back, trying to relax in the soft chair.

"First of all you can go back to Earth on company pension," the doctor explained. "You've had our primary treatment. Your body is well and your mind is mended to a limited extent. We can dope you up and send you back. Of course we hope you won't want to go back; however some choose it. We find that, as a class, they usually do very well for themselves on Earth and are fairly happy in their choice. But if you go you will never be allowed to go to space again, not even to the moon."

"Why should I care," Lou murmured.

It was as if the doctor had not heard him. "There is a second choice, which we hope you will consider very strongly. You have probably heard about it. You can stay here on Mars and try further treatments." His voice was softer. "We have a drug we give." He broke off and stared at his cigarette for a moment and then lifted his eyes to Lou's. "Did you ever have a dream and remember something that had happened to you before, remember it in detail?"

"Almost every night," Lou said.

The doctor moved the hand with the cigarette impatiently. "With this drug you will live it again, not just remember." He leaned back in the chair. "Yesterday you told me that man had not matured enough for space; that we were ahead of ourselves. In a way you are right. Certain phases of our science have not caught up with other parts. Psychiatry is one of the undeveloped fields, but we are learning."

On me you're learning . . . Lou thought.

"Because of this," the doctor droned on, "we were not prepared to deal, when the time came, with traumatic psychoses such as you have. Now, only recently, we have developed a 'half-cure.' With it there is a chance, not a big one I admit, that you may do better by yourself in that fraction of a second when the screens went down. And there is a chance that you may not do as well."

Like old Johnny, Lou thought. *That's what they did to Johnny.*

"You've been a space officer," the doctor continued. "From your record you were a good one, and Lord knows that it's hard to get trained personnel enough to keep our ships up. There is another reason, more personal to you: Sometimes space officers are happy only in space. No amount of money or success that they get on Earth ever makes them happy. The aptitude tests that you took soon after you arrived here indicate that you might be one of these."

"I want to go back to Earth," Lou said.

"I will not listen to a decision from you today," Doctor Earl said. "Give it some thought, man."

"I will not change my mind."

For the first time, Lou saw something akin to anger on the doctor's face. "Then

come back and tell me tomorrow," Doctor Earl said.

Walking back down the corridor, Lou's mind ran wildly. To return to Earth—a man dreamed of that, dreamed and planned. A house by the sea, in a temperate zone—someplace where the soft ocean waves could soothe and calm. To do nothing, for nothing was necessary. Then a woman and someday children.

How long it had been. He had been eighteen when he went into the Academy. Now he was thirty-four and during the almost thirteen years since graduation he had only touched Earth a few times. But he had dreamed.

There was the company pension. It should be enough to allow him to get by very well. If he wanted a job there were plenty open to an ex-spaceman.

And yet somehow, even as he decided, there was a moment's doubt. What had that look of anger meant on the doctor's face? Some are not happy unless they are in space?

HE WENT back to the ward. It was empty now, except for Johnny. All of the others were at the evening meal. The old man looked up briefly at him and somberly nodded, his eyes saying nothing. Lou nodded back and went on. The excitement had driven all thoughts of food from his mind. He took his shoes off, propped up his pillow, and lay back against the bed.

He was not aware that the old man had come up, so deep was he in thought.

The voice broke through: "You're going back, eh?"

Lou set up straight and looked at the old man. For the first time he saw something akin to interest in the deep-set eyes. Johnny sat on a neighboring bed, hunched over, his wrinkled, but still strong arms crossed.

"Back to Earth, Johnny. No more eight on and eight off. Back to a place where you can take two steps without running into a steel bulkhead," Lou said softly.

"You have had enough of space and the worlds out there," the old man said, his voice unquestioning.

"All I ever want."

The old man frowned. "Why did you go into space in the first place?"

Lou thought about it for a moment. "Why is a man a policeman, or a doctor, or a lawyer? When I was a kid I wanted to go to the moon more than anything else. My folks lived right outside Kansas City and every night at nine o'clock I could hear the mail rocket go over on its way to Los Angeles." Lou laughed, suddenly self-conscious. "It got to the place where I couldn't go to sleep until the mail rocket had gone over. Then, when I was eight years old, Canar invented the light-drive. I was twelve when the first ship left for Vega. I tried to stowaway and got caught."

The old man cut in: "But you did not like it in space?"

Lou frowned, searching for an answer. "Yes, I liked it. At least at first I liked it."

"And now you are afraid?"

Lou looked at the old man, saying nothing.

"You feel that it has turned on you; that something which was your friend is not now so friendly," the old man said. "I know—it was that way with me too at first."

"But not now?" Lou asked.

"Not now," the old man said. He looked down at the floor. "Now there is only the fear left and the longing." He looked back up and his eyes closed. "Someday I shall be able to look out that window in the corridor and see the stars. Someday I will ship again. Maybe it will be tomorrow that I beat it; I take the drug again then. Maybe it will be five years, or ten. But it will be someday. Then I will go back to the place I live."

"You mean Earth?" Lou asked.

The old man smiled. "A Starman's home is only one place—out there."

That night Lou dreamed he was on a strange planet. The night was warm, pungent with strange smells. A new world, a virgin world, a place for Earth's overcrowded billions. And then, suddenly, there was flame overhead, the white, whistling flame of atomic motors. They were leaving him behind. He stretched out his arms to the white trail above him. Then the ship was gone. He was alone.

He awoke then and it was morning. With a quickening of interest he looked down the ward to where old Johnny slept.

The bed was empty. They must have already come for him.

Lou dressed slowly and went to the dining room. The bright lights of the overhead fluorescents seemed to make the polished metal of the serving counters even more antiseptic in appearance. The food was good, but Lou was not hungry.

He overtook the procession on the way back to the ward. It was Doctor Earl, two orderlies and a nurse. One of the orderlies was pushing a hooded wheelchair. Lou walked behind them to the ward.

They helped the old man out of the chair as Lou watched. Johnny's eyes were shut tightly and the thin, old body trembled as he lay on the bed.

Lou felt a sudden wave of anger surge within him as the orderlies and the nurse picked at the old man, covering him, adjusting the bed. He touched Doctor Earl's arm as the man came past. "How many times before you give up?"

The doctor looked somberly at him. "When he does," he said, and pulled his arm away and walked out of the ward.

LOU packed his gear that afternoon. The interview with Doctor Earl had been very calm and emotionless. The man had not asked him to reconsider again.

Now there were only the few days of waiting.

He spent them idly. He read a few books from the hospital's immense library and in the afternoons he swam in the heated patients' pool. Now that the decision was finally made he felt a torpor, as if something important had been lost and yet the loss was not of a value that could be considered and regained.

Several times he tried to talk to Johnny, but the old man was either asleep or pretended to be when Lou came back to the ward. It was not until the night before Lou was to leave that he caught the old man awake.

He went back and sat down on an empty bed next to the old man's. Johnny's face was emotionless now. Only his eyes showed the fear.

"I'm going back tomorrow, Johnny," Lou said.

"Good luck to you."

"It's funny, but I don't know your last name," Lou said softly. "I'd like to write you after I get back and see if—well you know."

"Don't write," Johnny said stolidly. "You won't anyway. Once you get out of here you'll want to forget everything about it. Besides, I never read my mail anymore."

"I'll take a chance," Lou said, smiling.

"All right," the old man sighed. "It's Canar—John R. Canar."

For a moment the name made no connection in Lou's brain . . . "John Canar," he said. "You invented the light-drive."

"I had to do with it—it bears my name," Johnny said.

"I tried to stow away on your ship when you went to Vega," Lou said softly. "You must have made a lot of money out of the drive. I thought you had retired."

The old man looked up at him for an instant, a shadow of expression passing across his face. "I didn't work on it for money. I wanted to go to the stars." He looked pointedly at Lou. "And now I want to go to sleep."

Lou got up and moved away, feeling mildly hurt and resentful.

Three times that night he dreamed the dream. Once it began in the Andromedan system. There was a feeling of unfamiliar, and yet familiar constellations in the sky. There was that moment of half-beauty, half-fear that comes to every man who has ever seen a world that is not his own, and yet, in a peculiar way, has exerted ownership over that strange world. There were dim remembered twilights under double suns. And always there was that moment in time when the screens had gone down, that moment of complete fear.

Each time Lou awakened in a cold sweat only to drift restlessly off into sleep again. The second time was worse for it began on Earth. It was a memory of things past, rockets overhead, soft fields of midwestern grain beneath his feet. The dream skipped portions of his life away, like stones across a millpond, only touching the fluid surface, yet rippling it. Once again it built into a crescendo that ended only in final black-out . . . when the screens went down.

The third time he was on the moon, pressure-suited, alone. In the distance a

space ship blotted out a portion of the horizon and he was walking toward it. It was a long walk. Then there were the shining insides of the ship, still fascinating, though not as mysterious as they had been on the first trip—flight—and then the screens went down. This time he did better. There was still the feeling of surprise when he saw the blood running down his hand and the stars still smirked at him from outside. But his hands had reached up, with only a slight tremble, for the controls.

He awoke again with a vague feeling of disquietude.

It was morning.

He went to the dining room for his last meal. He ate. He went back to the ward. His things had already been picked up and sent out to the ship.

An hour later he was walking woodenly up the ramp of the ship that would carry him back. He stopped and stood there for a moment, looking up into the gaping hatch. Someone motioned to him impatiently from it.

He turned away and began to run. He did not stop until he came to the pneumo-tube and set its control for the hospital. His hands worked feverishly at the knobs as he warily watched for a sign of pursuit from the ship outside. None came.

DOCTOR EARL said: "I know you'd be back." He looked at Lou contemplatively. "You asked me once why I was out here. Now I can tell you. I've treated almost a thousand men like you in ten years—men who had space phobia. Maybe two-thirds of those men told me they would choose to go back to Earth. A few of them, maybe fifty, did go back, but most were like you. Even John Canar got to the ship before he changed his mind. That was the first time he had to make the choice, a long time ago. He knows now."

"Knows what, Doc?" Lou asked softly.

Doctor Earl twisted in his chair, search-

ing, it seemed to Lou, for the right words. "Knows that he is different," he said finally. "Maybe not better, but different than the average man. You live half of your life out there in the stars and it changes you. You are not an Earthman anymore, you're a Starman."

"When do I take the drug, Doc?" Lou asked.

Doctor Earl studied him and then smiled. "I think I can tell you, Lou. You've had the drug. Sometimes we don't tell them."

"I don't understand, Doc."

"You've had a thousand doses of it; in every meal, in every drink of water, from the first day you arrived here."

"But Johnny?"

"Light doses didn't work for him; he's built up an immunity to anything but massive doses given intravenously." The doctor shifted in his chair. "There are a million-million planets out there available to us through the light-drive. We've got maybe a million men in space. Earth bases her economy on those men. We're out of the shell—hatched—and we can't go back again. A Starman is Earth's most valuable asset. So you see we couldn't let your phobia dictate your choice for you. You had to be given the drug and a chance to make a rational choice without the inhibition of the phobia." He smiled. "What have you been dreaming of?"

"I see what you mean," Lou said. "All I've dreamed of since I came here are the stars." He thought for a moment. "What if I'd gotten aboard that ship?"

"You would have gone back to Earth. We wouldn't have stopped you. The drug only makes your choice more rational by letting you see your fear over again for what it is."

Lou stood up. "Thank you, Doctor. Now I'd like to go back to the ward and see someone."

"Johnny?"

"Yes," Lou said. "I want to tell him I'm going home."

IMAGE OF SPLENDOR

By LU KELLA

From Venus to Earth, and all the way between, it was a hell of a world for men . . . and Apprentice Burnerman O'Rielly particularly.

THE intercom roared fit to blow O'Rielly back to Venus. "Burner Four!

"On my way, sir!"

At the first flash of red on the bank of meters Apprentice Burnerman O'Rielly had slammed the safety helmet on his head; he was already throwing open the lock to the burner room. The hot, throbbing rumble whipped around him and near crushed his breath away. Power! Power of the universe trapped here and ready to destroy its captors given one chance! Swiftly O'Rielly unlocked the controls and reset them. The throbbing rumble changed tone.

Old Callahan's voice crackled now through the helmet's ear contact. "Well, Mr. O'Rielly?"

"Fusion control two points low, sir."

O'Rielly wondered had Callahan passed out, was so long before the old Burner Chief demanded hoarsely, "Didn't you lock them controls before blast-off?"

"If every control hadn't been locked in correct setting," O'Rielly answered from his own angry bewilderment, "the error would have registered before blast-off—wouldn't it, sir?"

"So a control reset itself in flight, hey?"

"I don't know yet, sir."

"Well, Mr. O'Rielly, you better know before we orbit Earth!"

The icy knot in O'Rielly's stomach jerked tighter. A dozen burners on this ship; why did something crazy have to happen to O'Rielly's? In a hundred years, so the instructors—brisk females all—had told O'Rielly in pre-flight school, no control had ever been known to slip. But one had moved here. Not enough to cause serious trouble this far out from Earth. On blast-down,

though, with one jet below peak, the uneven thrust could throw the ship, crash it, the whole lovely thing and all aboard gone in a churning cloud.

Sweat pouring off him, O'Rielly prowled around his burner. Design of the thing had been bossed by dames of course; what on Earth wasn't any more? Anyway, nobody could get to a burner except through its watch room. Anyone entered or left there, a bell clanged, lights flashed and a meter registered beside the Burnerman's bunk and on the Burner Chief's console up in the flight room full of beautifully efficient officers. Ever since Venus blast-off O'Rielly had been in Four's watch room. Nobody had passed through. O'Rielly knew it. Callahan knew it. By now the Old Woman herself, Captain Millicent Hatwoody, had probably inquired what was in charge of Burner Four.

Well, ma'am, O'Rielly searched every cranny where even a three-tailed mouse of Venus could have stowed away. His first flight, and O'Rielly saw himself washed out, busted to sweeper on the blast-off stands of some God-forsaken satellite. He staggered back into his watch room. And his brain was suddenly taken apart and slapped together again. Felt that way.

She was sitting on his bunk. No three-tailed mouse. No Old Woman either. Oh, she was a female human, though, this creature at which O'Rielly stood gaping. Yes, ma'am!

"I was in your burner room." Her voice matched the rest of her, a blend of loveliness unlike anything outside a guy's most secret dreams. "I couldn't stand the heat any longer and I couldn't open that big door. So I moved one of your controls a

tiny bit. All the noise in there, naturally you couldn't hear me walk out while your back was turned resetting the control."

O'RIELLY suddenly felt like an angel. Her over his knee and whaling her until she couldn't sit for a year. This, mind you, he felt in an age where no Earth guy for a thousand years had dared raise so much as a breath against woman's supremacy in all matters. That male character trait, however, did not seem to be the overpowering reason why O'Rielly, instead of laying violent hands upon this one's person, heard himself saying in sympathetic outrage, "A shame you had to go to all that bother to get out here!"

"You're so kind. But I'm afraid I became rather sticky and smelly in there."

"They ought to cool the air in there with perfume! I'll drop a suggestion in the Old Woman's box first chance I get."

"You're so thoughtful. And do you have bathing facilities?"

"That door right there. Oh, let me open it for you!"

"You're so sweet." Her big dark eyes gazed with such pure innocence that O'Rielly could have torn down the universe and rebuilt it just for her.

Yes, ma'am, O'Rielly was floating on a pink cloud with heavenly music in his head. Never felt so fine before. Except on the Venus layover when he'd been roped into a dice game with a bunch of Venus lads who had a jug to cheer one's parting with one's money.

A bell suddenly clanged fit to wake the dead while the overhead lights flashed wildly. Only the watch room door. Only Callahan here now. Old buzzard had a drooped nose like a pick, chin like a shovel.

When he talked he was like digging a hole in front of himself. "Well, what about that control?"

"What control?"

"Your fusion control that got itself two points low!"

"Oh, that little thing."

Callahan said something through his teeth, then studied O'Rielly sharply. "Hey, you been wetting your whistle on that Venus vino again? Lemme smell your breath! Bah. Loaded yourself full of chloro-

phyll again probably. All right, stand aside whilst I see your burner."

"Charmed to, Burner Chief Callahan, sir," O'Rielly said while bowing gracefully.

"Higher than a swacked skunk's tail again," Callahan muttered, then snapped back over his shoulder, "Use your shower!"

O'Rielly stood considering his shower door. Somehow he doubted that Burner Chief Terrence Callahan's mood, or Captain Millicent Hatwoody's, would be improved by knowledge of she who was in O'Rielly's shower now. Not that the dear stowaway was less than charming. Quite the contrary. Oh, very quite!

"You rockhead!" Only Callahan back from the burner. "Didn't I tell you to shower the stink off yourself? Old Woman's taking a Venus bigwig on tour the ship. Old Woman catches you like you been rassling skunks she'll peel both our hides off. Not to mention what she'll do anyway about your fusion control!"

"Burner Chief Callahan, sir," O'Rielly responded courteously, "I have been thinking."

"With what? Never mind, just keep on trying whilst I have a shower for myself here." Wherewith Callahan reached hand for O'Rielly's shower door.

"Venus dames," O'Rielly said dreamily, "don't boss anything, do they?"

Callahan yelped like he'd been bit in the pants by a big Jupiter ant. "O'Rielly! You trying to get both of us condemned to a Uranus moon?" Callahan also shot a wild look to the intercom switch. It was in OFF position; the flight room full of fancy gold-lace petticoats could not have overheard from here. Nevertheless Callahan's eyes rolled like the devil was behind him with the fork ready. "O'Rielly, open your big ears whilst for your own good and mine I speak of certain matters."

"Thousand years ago, it was, the first flight reached Venus. Guys got one look at them dames. Had to bring some home or bust. So then everybody on Earth got a look, mostly by TV only of course. That did it. Every guy on Earth began blowing his fuse over them dames. Give up the shirt off his back, last buck in the bank, his own Earth dame or family—everything.

"Well, that's when Earth dames took



over like armies of wild cats with knots in their tails. Before the guys who'd brought the Venus dames to Earth could say anything they was taken apart too small to pick up with a blotter. Earth dames wound up by flying the Venus ones back where they come from and serving notice if one ever set foot on Earth again there wouldn't be enough left of Venus to find with an electron microscope.

"VENUS boys rared up and served notice that if Earth ever got any funny notions, right away there wouldn't be enough Earth left to hide in an atom's eyebrow. Touchy as hornets on a hot griddle, them Venus guys. Crazier than bed bugs about war. Could smell a loose dollar a million light years away too. Finagled around until they finally cooked up a deal.

"No Venus dames allowed within fifty miles of their port. Earth guys stay inside the high-voltage fence. Any dame caught trying to leave Venus thrown to the tigers for supper. Same for any Earth guy caught around a Venus dame. In return, Earth could buy practically everything at bargain basement prices."

"Oh, I was shown the history films in pre-flight," O'Rielly said, still dreamily. "But not a peek of any Venus dame."

"Pray heaven you'll never lay eyes on one nor have one get within ten foot of you! Even though you'd know she'd be your damnation wouldn't make a whit difference—you'd still act sappier than thirty-seven angels flying on vino." Callahan suddenly stared at O'Rielly. "Holy hollering saints!"

"Now, now, Burner Chief Callahan, sir," O'Rielly responded with an airy laugh. "No Earth guy for a hundred twenty-five years been near one and lived to tell it, has he?"

"So the whispers run," Callahan murmured with a queer flame dancing into his eyes. "So the old whispers still run."

"Never a name, though. Never how it was done." O'Rielly snorted. "Probably just a goofy tale set loose by some old space bum."

"Oh?" Callahan bristled up like a bad name had been bandied about. "Seen them ditty bags Venus bigwigs have, ain't you? Some big enough to stuff a cow in. Notice how nobody ever dares question a big-

wig's bags, even through customs? Just run 'em through the big Geiger that tells whether there's any fusionable junk inside. Well, our boy got himself one of them bags, stuffed himself inside and joined a bigwig's pile of 'em.

"Didn't pull it whilst on the Venus port during a layover either, when a crew check would of turned him up missing. Pulled it on vacation. Started on the Earth end. Made himself a pair of beards to paste on his ears of course. Wove Jupiter wiggle worms in to keep the beards moving. Wasn't like the real thing, but good enough to flimflam Venus guys."

With suddenly enlivened interest O'Rielly looked at Callahan. "Hey, how come you know so much?"

"Hah? What?" Callahan blinked like waking from a trance; even groaned to himself, something that sounded like, "Blabbering like I'd had a nip myself—or one of them dillies was radiating nearb'." Then Callahan glared fit to drill holes in O'Rielly's head. "Look! I was a full Burnerman before you was born. Been flying the spaces hundred twenty-five years now. Had more chances to hear more—just hear more, you hear! Only tried to clear your mind about Venus dames so you could put your brain on your control mess. So now put it! If you ain't high on vino and ain't been made nuts by a Venus dame, what answer do we feed the Old Woman?"

"Search me," Apprentice Burnerman O'Rielly responded cheerfully.

"Of all the loony apprentices I ever had to answer the Old Woman for! Awp, lemme out where I can think of something to save me own neck at least!"

Was all O'Rielly could do to keep from rolling on the deck with glee. Old Callahan had been flimflammed for fair! The dear little stowaway was saved! And O'Rielly would now think of grand ways to save her lovely neck and his own forever.

O'Rielly's shower door, however, opened abruptly. O'Rielly had not opened it. O'Rielly, however, suffered a cruel stab of dismay. Surely his dear stowaway had been listening through the door. Why didn't she have brains enough to stay hid until Callahan was gone!

At sight of her, of course, Callahan's

eyes near popped from his old head. "Berta!"

"Oh, I'm Trillium," she assured Callahan sweetly. "But Grandmamma's name is Berta and people say I'm just like she was a hundred and twenty-five years ago."

"**II**AH? What?" Callahan blinked like his brain had been taken apart and was being slapped together again. "O'Rielly! Awp, you angel-faced pirate, couldn't you hide her somewheres better than that? Shut up, you don't have to explain to me, but God help the whole universe if we don't flimflam the Old Woman!" With which ominous remark, rendered in a zesty devil-may-care manner, however, Callahan threw himself into O'Rielly's shower.

O'Rielly stood looking thoughtfully at lovely, womanly, exquisite Trillium. Just like that, O'Rielly felt as sparkling of mind as a spiral nebula. "My locker!" he crowed with inspiration and yanked open the doors under his bunk. He glimpsed a black ditty bag, also the cap and coverall uniform of a baggage boy.

"I threw them in there before you came on duty before blast-off," Trillium explained. "I knew the burner room would be warm."

Trillium with her shape passing as a boy hustling bags through this ship. O'Rielly chortled as he tucked her under his bunk. "Now don't you worry about another thing!"

"Oh, I'm not," she assured him happily. "Everything is going just the way Grandmamma knew it would!"

O'Rielly's shower opened and Callahan, glowing like a young bucko, bounced onto the bunk. "Well, did you hide her good this time? No, don't tell me! I want to be surprised if the Old Woman ever finds her."

"If what old woman finds whom?" a voice like thin ice crackling wanted to know.

The watch room's door had opened. Wouldn't think the Old Woman was a day over seventy-five, let alone near two hundred. Cut of her uniform probably lent a helping hand or three to the young snap of her figure. Frosty blue of fancy hair-do, she was, though, and icy of eye as she

looked at O'Rielly and Callahan still lolling on the bunk.

Her voice was an iceberg exploding. "At attention!"

Never in his right mind would any crewman dare fail to come stiffly erect the instant the Old Woman appeared. Behind her stood a colorfully robed specimen of Venus man. Handsome as the devil himself. Fit to snap lesser men in two with his highly bejeweled hands. Fuzzy beads trailed from his ears and kept twitching lazily as he sneered at the spectacle of two men meekly acknowledging the superiority of a woman.

She was fit to put frost on a hydrogen burner. "Mr. Callahan, I asked you a question, did I not?"

"Believe you did, ma'am," Callahan responded cheerfully. "And the answer is, ma'am, that Apprentice Burnerman O'Rielly and me was discussing—ah—matrimony, ma'am. Mr. Apprentice Burnerman O'Rielly here is considering it, ma'am."

Wasn't too bad a fib. The more O'Rielly thought of Trillium, the more ideas he got of doing things he'd never dreamt of before in his life. Yes, ma'am!

"Wasting your time talking nonsense!" Old Woman's look was fit to freeze O'Rielly's brain, then she gave Callahan the look. "I sent you down here to find the answer to that fusion control slippage!"

"Oh, you'll have the best answer you ever heard of before long, ma'am!" Callahan assured her heartily. "The subject of nonsense—I mean, women—merely chanced to arise whilst we was scientifically analyzing the control phenomenon, ma'am. Naturally I offered this innocent young Burnerman the benefit of me long years of experience. Why," Callahan said with a jaunty laugh, "dames mean nothing to me. Indeed twouldn't bother me none if there wasn't one of the things left in the world! Present company excepted, of course," Callahan hastened to say with a courtly bow.

"Stay at attention!" Old Woman sniffed the air near Callahan's face, then in O'Rielly's vicinity. "Smothered it with chlorophyll probably," she muttered through her teeth, "if it is that vino." Something horrible as a plague flickered in her eyes, then the old ice was there again. "Ap-

prentice Burnerman, don't you know what your shower is for? Then use it! Mr. Callahan, remain at attention while I inspect this burner!" She tendered a cool glance at the Venus bigwig. "Care to join me, Your Excellency?"

"May as well." His Excellency glanced at O'Rielly and Callahan much as he might at a couple of worms. Could bet your last old sox no female ever told any Venus man what to do.

The shower units were equipped so no Burnerman need be more than two steps from his responsibility. To keep the Old Woman from possibly blowing her gaskets completely, O'Rielly simply stepped in, shut the door, flipped a switch and tingled as he was electronically cleansed of person and clothes. By time he finished, the Old Woman and His Excellency were already coming out of the burner room, dripping with sweat.

Old Woman opened the shower with her customary commanding air. "You first, Your Excellency."

"My dear Captain," His Excellency replied like a smoothly drawn dagger, "always the lesser gender enjoys precedence."

No Earth dame ever admitted any guy was even equal to any female. Old Woman, a prime symbol of her gender's superiority, whipped a razor edge onto her own words. "Facilities of the Captain's quarters are more satisfactory."

"No more so than those of the Ambassatorial Suite."

SEEMING to grind her teeth, the Old Woman turned abruptly to leave O'Rielly's watch room. Was all O'Rielly could do to keep from busting out laughing for joy.

Old Woman had been flimflammed for fair! Dear Trillium was saved! And betwixt O'Rielly's grand brain and Callahan's great experience she'd be happy forever.

A fine loud "thump," however, was now heard. Old Woman whirled back and yanked open the doors under O'Rielly's bunk.

"Of all the sappy hiding places!" Callahan yelped, in surprise of course.

"Trillium?" His Excellency bellowed as

if stung by one of the sabre-tailed hornets of his native planet. "Trillium!"

"Trillium," O'Rielly pleaded in loving anguish, "why do you have to keep coming out of hiding just when nobody's going to find you?"

Her eyes merely became deep pools in which O'Rielly would have gladly drowned himself if he could.

"There are rewards," the Old Woman said with the deadly coldness of outer space, "for Earthmen found in a Venus woman's company, and for her leaving her planet."

"Shut up!" His Excellency's ear beards were standing straight out sideways. "I'll handle this!"

"May I remind His Excellency," the Old Woman snapped, "that I represent Earth and her dominion of space gained by right of original flight!"

"May I remind the Captain," His Excellency declared fit to be heard back to his planet, "that I am the Personal Ambassador of the President of Venus and this thing can mean war!"

"Yes! War in which people will actually die!" As His Excellency paled at that grisly remark, the Old Woman spoke through her teeth at O'Rielly, Callahan and Trillium. "All right, come along!"

O'Rielly joined the death march gladly. He felt the way Callahan looked: ready to wrap his arms around Trillium's brave loveliness and protect it to his last breath of life.

Old Woman led the way to her office. Jabbed some buttons on her desk. Panels on opposite walls lit up.

"Presidents of Earth and Venus, please," the Old Woman stated evenly. "Interplanetary emergency."

Highly groomed flunkies appeared on the panels and were impersonally pleasant.

"Madame President's office. She is in a Cabinet meeting."

"Mr. President's office. He is in personal command of our glorious war efforts."

Old Woman sighed through her teeth. "Venus woman aboard this ship. Stowaway. Rattle that around your belfries."

The flunkies' faces went slack with shock, then were replaced by a blizzard of scrambled faces and torrents of incoherent voices.

Finally on the Earth panel appeared the

famous classic features. "The facts, if you please, Captain H-two-ly."

The Venus panel finally held steady on universally notorious features that were as fierce as an eagle's, in a fancy war helmet.

"Trillium! My own granddaughter? Impossible! Dimdooly," Mr. President roared at his Excellency, "what's this nonsense?"

"Some loud creature is interfering," Madame President snapped with annoyance.

"Blasted fools still have the circuits crossed," Mr. President swore. "Some silly female cackling now!"

The parties in the panels saw each other now. Each one's left hand on a desk moved toward a big red button marked, ROCKETS.

"So," Mr. President said evenly. "Another violation by your Earthmen."

"By your granddaughter, at least," Madame President replied coolly.

"An innocent child," Mr. President snapped, "obviously kidnapped by those two idiotic Earthmen there!"

"Oh, no, Grandpapa," Trillium said swiftly; "I stole away all by myself, and Mr. O'Rielly and Callahan have been very helpful."

"Impossible!" Grandpapa President's ear beards stood near straight up as he roared, "You couldn't have stolen away by yourself! Trillium, tell the truth!"

"Very well. Grandmamma told me how."

"OBVIOUSLY Trillium's poor little brain has been drugged," His Excellency Dimdooly declared. "Grandmamma Berta wouldn't know the first thing about such things!"

"Impossible!" Grandpapa President agreed. "I've been married to her for a hundred and twenty-four and a half years and she's the finest rattle-brain I ever knew!"

"She learned," Trillium stated emphatically, "a hundred and twenty-five years ago."

"Hundred twenty-five," Grandpapa president growled like a boiling volcano. "The year some Earthman. . . . Never did catch the devil. . . . Berta? Impossible!"

Madame President's shapely finger now rested full on the button that could launch the fleets of war rockets that had been pre-aimed for a thousand years. "I'm afraid your Ambassador is unwelcome now," Ma-

dame President stated coolly. "Your granddaughter's actions have every mark of an invasion tactic by your government."

"What do you mean, her actions?" Grandpapa President's finger now lay poised on the button that had been waiting a thousand years to blow Earth out of the universe. "My grandchild was kidnapped by men under your official command! Weren't you, Trillium dear?"

"No. One of us stowing away was the only way we Venus women could bring our cause to the attention of Earth's President. If Earth will only stop buying from Venus, you won't have any money to squander on your wars any longer no matter what happens to we revolutionaries!"

"Revolutionaries? Such claptrap! And what's wrong with my wars? People have to have something to keep their minds off their troubles! Nobody around here gets hurt. Oh, maybe a few scratches here and there. But nobody on Venus dies from the things any more."

"But Venus men are so excited all the time about going to war they haven't time for us women. That's why we always radiated such a fatal attraction for Earthmen. We want to be loved! We want our own men home doing useful work!"

"Well, they do come home and do useful work! Couple weeks every ten months. Proven to be a highly efficient arrangement."

"More boys to run off to your old wars and more girls to stay home and be lonely!"

"Now you just listen to me, Trillium!" Grandpapa President was all Venus neighborhood laying down the law. "That's the way things have been on Venus for ten thousand years and all the women in the universe can't change it!"

"I have been in constant contact with my Cabinet during these conversations," Madame President said crisply. "Earth is terminating all trade agreements with Venus as of this instant."

"What?" Grandpapa's beards near pulled his ears off. "It's not legal! You can't get away with that!"

"Take your finger off that trigger, boy!" a heavenly voice similar to Trillium's advised from the Venus panel.

Whereupon Grandpapa glared at . . .

side. "Berta! What are you doing here? I am deciding matters of the gravest interplanetary nature!"

"Were." Features more beautifully mature than Trillium's crowded onto the panel too. "From now on I'm doing the deciding."

"Nonsense! You're only my wife!"

"And new President of Venus, elected by unanimous vote of all women."

"Impossible! The men run Venus! Nobody's turning this planet into another Earth where a man can't even sneeze unless some woman says so!"

"Take him away, girls," Berta ordered coolly, whereupon her spouse was taken from view.

His bellows, however, could be heard yet. "Unhand me, you fool creatures! Guards! Guards!"

"Save your breath," Berta advised him. "And while you're in the cooler, enjoy this latest batch of surrender communiques. We women are in control everywhere now."

"Dimmy," Trillium was saying firmly to his belly, "I have had you around the bush with me long enough. Now say it!"

DIMDOOLY, who had sneered at the sight of mere Earthmen kowtowing to a mere woman—swelled up fit to blow his gaskets, then all the gas went out of him. His ear beards, however, still had enough zip left to flutter like butterflies. "Yes, Trillium dear. I love only you. Please marry me at your earliest convenience."

"Well, Grandmamma," Trillium said with a highly self-satisfied air, "it works. And just like you said, Earthmen meant nothing once I knew we Venus women had our own men in our power."

"Those crewmen there," Grandmamma President said, "seem to be proof enough that we Venus women no longer radiate any threat to Earth's tranquility."

Yes, ma'am, O'Rielly sure felt like proof of something all of a sudden. Worse than the hangover from that crap game with Venus vino. He looked away from Trillium and took a look at Callahan. Old guy looked away from Grandmamma President like he was packing the second biggest headache in history.

"Hmmm, yes," Madame President of Earth observed. "Reactions agree perfectly with the psychoanalytical research project we have been conducting on the subject of the Venus female influence. Madame President of Venus, congratulations on your victory!"

"Long may the superior sex reign on Venus too! We shall be delighted to receive an Ambassadors to discuss a new trade treaty at your earliest convenience."

"Thank you for cancelling the old trade agreements at the psychological moment," Grandmamma President said cordially. "What with the communications mixup, we managed to have the scenes on these panels broadcast throughout all Venus. When the rug went out from under the top man, the tide really turned in our favor. Now, Trillium, you take over Dimmy's credentials."

"The Ambassadorial Suite, too," Madame President of Earth said graciously. "Anything else now, Berta?"

"I should like," Grandmamma President Berta said charmingly, "that Mr. O'Rielly and Mr. Callahan be suitably rewarded for assisting our revolution better than they knew."

"Of course," Madame President of Earth was delighted to oblige. "No doubt Captain Hatwoody knows what reward would satisfy their needs best."

The Madame Presidents switched to a private circuit, Trillium dragged Dimdooly off somewhere and the Old Woman eyed O'Rielly and Callahan. Especially she eyed Callahan, like running chilled drills through his old conniving brain. "I award the pair of you five minutes leisure before returning to your stations."

"Oh, well," O'Rielly muttered, once he and Callahan were safely beyond earshot, "could have been rewarded worse, I suppose."

"What you expect for being flimflammed by a foreign dame, the rings of Saturn? Lucky we ain't programmed to be hung, shot and thrown to the crows for breakfast." Callahan's old pick-and-shovel face wore a little grin like the cat that nobody could prove ate the canary.

"You—I mean, that Earth guy a hundred twenty-five years ago," O'Rielly said in sudden thought. "If Venus dames wanted

to be loved so bad, why did Trillium's Grandmamma let him go?"

"Venus guys wasn't so busy playing war all the time," Callahan mumbled, like to himself, "they'd of found out the answer centuries ago. Yep, guess our boy was the only guy on Earth or Venus to find out and live. Dames bossing both planets now, though, his old secret won't be one much longer. Venus dames could of let it out centuries ago themselves but didn't, just to spite Earth probably. Later, was part of organizing to take over Venus, I guess."

O'Rielly still had memories of the way he had felt about Trillium before her revolution. "All right, Callahan, why did 'our boy' leave Grandmamma?"

"Yes, ma'am," Callahan sighed like he hadn't heard a word O'Rielly said, "you could sweet-talk 'em, kiss 'em and hold 'em tighter'n Billy-be-damned. And that's all."

"I'm not sure," O'Rielly said, "what you mean by, 'that's all.'"

"Anybody ever seen anybody but a Venus guy come built with ear beards? Course no."

"But I thought our boy was wearing the best fakes ever."

"Ain't nothing can match the natural growed-on variety, no, ma'am. Venus guy kisses a Venus dame, his beards grabs her roundst the ears."

"So what?"

"Tickles 'em, boy, tickles 'em!"



THE BRIDES OF OOL

By M. A. CUMMINGS

The Goddess of Love had never showered Ool with her favors. He was the saddest lover this side of Io . . . either that, or the most skillful lady killer since the invention of Gilk's death-ray.

AS THE soft tones of the morning gong sounded through the cabin Ool yawned and stretched. Then he grinned, remembering. This was the first morning of his honeymoon. Of course, honeymoons were even more out-of-date than marriage services. But Loris had wanted both and Ool was willing to let her have her way.

Funny to think that after all this time Loris was really his. His hand caressed the form lying beside him, the flesh smooth and cool as marble.

Cold! He sat up suddenly, staring at the girl. The pearly lustre of her skin had faded to a chalky white, and he could see no sign of breathing. Frantically he felt for a heartbeat. There was none. Loris—his beautiful Loris, was dead.

As the lights glowed on the board, the young Watcher forgot discipline, even forgot the inter-office video. Stumbling into the captain's office, he shouted,

"It's Commander Ool. He's requesting permission to land—" he gulped, came to attention, "sir."

The captain was equally startled. But years of training helped him to keep control.

"Wonder where he's been all this time. No report from him in weeks. Permission granted. And tell him to report up here at once. The Old Men will want to hear about this. I wouldn't want to be in his boots."

"If I'd been gone this long I wouldn't have bothered to come back," the Watcher said.

"They'd have found him sooner or later. He couldn't stay up forever," the captain

said. "Better get those signals out." And the young Watcher went back to his post, shaking his head over anyone foolish enough to anger the Old Men, while the captain put through a call to Committee headquarters.

Between the frequent tests and long periods of questioning, Ool was also wondering where he had been. Two weeks gone out of his life without the slightest glimmer of a memory about them. Two weeks of floating in space. Had Loris been dead all the time? Or had she died while he lay unconscious? Had he—could he have killed her without knowing it?

Furiously Ool tried to assemble his thoughts, to force his tired brain back over all that had happened, trying to find some explanation.

He could remember perfectly except for the last two weeks. The Invasion—which had threatened to wipe out Civilization. When, in the last desperate moments, the untested Gilkite rays had been used, and like an invisible screen, had held off the foe. How he alone had stood for hours at the machines, after Gilk, the froglike Martian inventor had run from the scene, howling with terror.

The crowds claiming him as the hero of the hour, screaming for the sight of him. Then the meeting with Loris—Loris of the silver hair, the long slim body which gleamed like pearl, the husky voice.

It had been a struggle to get the Old Men to grant them permission to mate, for Loris was a Venusian and not at all the proper sort of mate for a Warrior. But with the success of Gilkite, there might be no more need for Warriors—so permission was granted. And now Loris was dead.



Once more Ool was summoned before the committee.

"The committee agrees," said the Oldest Man, "that you could not have been responsible for the death of your mate."

"The Gilkite—" Ool began.

"Only Gilk knows positively what to expect from it, and he cannot be found. However, our scientists have given you every known test. And believe me, Captain, if there were the slightest suspicion in the minds of any one of them, the order would have been given for your immediate destruction. We would take no chances on your being a carrier of death rays."

And Loris?"

"You will remember that the committee opposed this mating. Although Loris' ancestors—like those of all of us—were Terrans, the generations had adapted themselves to life on Venus. We do not know what changes have taken place; how they will be affected by situations which are normal to us."

Ool stood silent. In his own mind, that did not answer the question of what had happened to Loris, or what had gone on during the two weeks.

"Unfortunately," the Oldest Man went on smoothly, as if answering his thoughts, "we have no way of telling what did happen. There was a flaw in the communications system of your ship. Shortly after you took off the Security Screen went blank."

The prisoner felt the blood slowly rising in his face. The screen had gone blank, but it had been no accident.

HE REMEMBERED Loris coming up behind him as he worked on the screen.

"What are you doing?" she asked curiously.

"Sh," he warned. He worked a moment more, then the screen went blank.

"This is one ship that isn't going to have any Security Check for a while," he announced with satisfaction.

"Won't you get into trouble?"

"Probably, but it will be worth it." He grinned at her appreciatively. Loris was wearing a robe of misty green, through which her body gleamed as though she stood in the midst of a soft cloud. Ool shook his head.

"Good thing I turned it off when I did. If some old Security Watcher could see you now, his hardened arteries would probably break into a million pieces."

Loris laughed huskily and stretched her arms above her head. The green mist settled slowly around her ankles. He could remember his vague surprise that the pearly-hued flesh was not cold as she came into his arms, but warm, quite warm—

Was he imagining it, or was there a twinkle in the eye of the Oldest Man?

"The Old Men," he was saying drily, "are not too old to have memories. The destruction of a Security Check could be considered a major crime but, since there is no war, the committee is willing to take into consideration your excellent record as Commander of the Patrol—and the circumstances. It is regrettable that we cannot tell what did happen to your mate, but the committee agrees that you are not to blame. You are free to go, Captain."

Ool walked out into the sunlight. He was free but Loris was dead.

He soon found that he was not alone in his grief. Messages poured in. With the familiarity they always feel toward their heroes, the people had made his loss their own. And when he met Tanya, the exotically Martian dancer, they shared his happiness.

There was no attempt this time to disconnect the Security Screen, so the Watchers were able to tell exactly what happened. The two merely fell asleep. Ool—as he must have done before—slept for several days, as if he had been drugged, then awoke to find himself a widower for the second time. Nothing had happened, but Tanya was dead.

The examination to which Ool was submitted now was even more thorough than the one he had undergone earlier. The results were the same. Once more he was found innocent.

But if the committee absolved him, many of the people did not. Black looks were thrown at him, people began to edge away from him in the streets.

Ool did not blame them. To him, it was as simple as it was to them. Two women had mated with him; two women were dead. The fault was his.

There were plenty of places where they

didn't care who you were or what you had done as long as you had the price of a drink. Ool found them all. In them gathered the outcasts of half a dozen planets—thieves, murderers, saboteurs—and in the midst of them, Captain Ool, the pride of the Interplanetary Patrol, tried to drink himself into oblivion.

He was well on his way one night sitting alone at his table when a girl came to the door and looked in, as if searching for someone. Not the sort of girl you'd expect to find in a place like this; she was clean and healthy. Her short golden curls gleamed through the blue haze, and her firm-muscled young body in its short tunic was the focus of many bleary eyes as she threaded her way between the tables.

"Ool, I've been looking for you," she cried. He looked at her hazily.

"You don't want me," he spoke carefully, managing not to slur his words. "I'm Ool, the lady killer. I'll get you if you don't watch out." He giggled and tipped up the bottle. It was empty so he waved the waiter over.

"My capac—capacity's increasing," he told the girl. "At first I couldn't finish one bottle. Now I can almost finish two."

"Ool, listen—" she caught at his arm.

He brushed her aside and reached for the bottle in the waiter's hand.

The girl beckoned the waiter aside, whispered to him. He shook his head, then nodded as she slipped something into his hand. They came to the table.

"You'd better go with the lady," the waiter advised, but Ool ignored him and took another drink. The waiter lifted him to his feet. Through the thickening fog Ool saw the man's fist go back.

Then came the oblivion he wanted.

HE AWOKE in what seemed to be a laboratory. It seemed familiar. So did the voices he heard, both talking at once. They broke off as he moved.

"Ryyn, he's coming to," the girl's voice cried.

Ool looked up. Standing over him were two figures in white tunics. Both had the same blue eyes and short golden hair. He closed his eyes and shook his head to clear it, then wished he hadn't.

The girl laughed happily.

"You're not seeing double," she assured him. "Don't you remember us?"

Ool opened his eyes once more. The words, the girl's tone, set his fuzzy brain to working. Of course—the man was Ryyn, who had been one of his best friends at the Academy. Ryyn, whose brilliant mind had already won him a recommendation for a place on the committee; the youngest man ever to be considered.

Then the girl—the girl who had come after him—must be Ryaa, his twin sister. Ool remembered her as a slim, boyish kid. There was certainly nothing boyish about her appearance now.

Ool tried to sit up and instantly Ryaa was by his side, helping him.

"Just take it easy," she advised. "Ryyn is going to give you something to make you feel better."

"Ryaa, I am not in the business of making hangover remedies," Ryyn growled. But at the same time he thrust something into Ool's hand. "Drink," he commanded.

Ool obeyed, shuddering.

"Anything that tastes that bad should either kill or cure," he said. "Probably be better for me if it killed."

"Don't say that," Ryaa cried. "Ryyn is going to help you, aren't you?"

"Nobody can help me." He buried his face in his hands. "For all I know I really may have killed them."

Ryyn nodded.

"There's always that chance but I don't think so. Anything that deadly would show up in a test. But I'll have to know more about what happened—"

Step by step he led Ool back over every detail, from his meeting with each girl to her death.

Ryaa sat beside Ool, her hand in his, trying not to wince when he tightened his grip at some painful memory.

"Thanks," Ryyn said at last. "I think that's all I need right now. Sorry if I had to hurt you but I'm not in a position to keep up with the news. If we can do anything you'll have Ryaa to thank for it. She dragged me away from my experiments and made me promise to do what I could—or else," he grinned at his sister, "she threatened to foul things up and leave

me hanging somewhere in space indefinitely."

Ool stared at the girl beside him. This didn't sound like the quiet little Ryaa he had known. But her scarlet face showed that at least a part of Rynn's statement was true.

"Now," Rynn continued, "I have things to do. Ryaa, why don't you take this big fellow in tow, and the two of you go out and have a good time?"

"Do you think it's wise?" Ool asked.

"Oh, yes," Ryaa breathed. Rynn grinned.

"I think so. I want you to forget as completely as possible that this conversation ever took place. For a few days try not to think about it or me. It will help me if you don't."

When Ool began to be seen in public with another girl, excited whispers spread the news rapidly. Sympathetic glances came Ryaa's way but she seemed not to notice them. Before long some of her gaiety transferred itself to Ool, and for a time he forgot the tragedy hanging over him.

He was reminded abruptly by a summons from Rynn.

"I know the answer," he told Ool, "but we will have to have proof. The committee has given permission for an experiment. If Ryaa is willing to take a chance—"

"I'll do anything to help Ool," Ryaa said fervently.

"I thought so," her brother answered. "So I asked the committee to grant you two permission to mate."

"No," Ool cried hoarsely. "Not Ryaa. I don't want her to die too."

"Nothing will happen to Ryaa if you both do exactly as I say. It's our only chance to prove your innocence. Besides, I've already made the announcement. There's nothing you can do about it now."

Ool glared at him helplessly, then sank into a chair. Ryaa came to him and put her arms around him.

"You said you were willing to do what Rynn wanted. So am I. If he says I'll be all right, I will."

"Well," Ool was only half convinced.

"If it's all right with Ryaa. What do you

"Just one thing right now—just stay here till I give the word."

Rynn's announcement spread quickly, and the reception was what might have been expected. The people were shocked.

"I don't think the committee should allow it," was the usual comment.

"There may be more women than men in the Universe, but if Ool keeps on mating with them, we'll soon be even," remarked someone with misplaced humor.

WHEN Rynn had decided that the news had spread enough, he gave them the word. Ryaa had voted for the space ship to show that she really wasn't afraid of the jinx, but Rynn forbade that. He had personally chosen a resort, and had used his influence to overcome the owner's reluctance. It was Rynn, too, who had the would-be interviewers and most of the curious crowd cleared away.

Several of the remarks made by the crowd had started Ool to worrying again. And in spite of her brave remarks, he knew that Ryaa was afraid too.

"You don't have to go through with this," he told her. "No one would blame you for walking out."

Ryaa shook her head.

"It will be all right," she insisted. Standing on tiptoe, she caught his face between her hands and pressed her lips to his.

"That's how much I think of your old curse," she murmured and fled into the other room.

When she returned she had changed into a sheer blue gown that just matched her eyes, and did nothing to hide her perfectly formed body. Ool stared. He knew that she had grown up but he hadn't realized how beautiful she had become.

He took a step toward her. But there, standing beside her, were the ghostly figures of Loris and Tanya. He stopped abruptly and his arms fell to his sides.

"I must say you don't act much like an ardent bridegroom," Ryaa complained. "After all, we're supposed to behave normally." She caught his arms and drew them around her. Slipping her arms around his neck she raised her face to his.

Ool's arms tightened around her and his lips met hers.

Behind Ryaa a chair disintegrated with a whispered sigh, unheard by the lovers.

But they did hear the crash of splintering glass as two struggling figures hurtled into the room. Ryaa clung to Ool as the fighters thrashed around them, unrecognizable at first. Then a slim, golden-haired figure seemed to be forcing his opponent down.

"Rryn," Ryaa exclaimed. "But who—"

The two figures were struggling over some sort of a weapon. A sudden twist of Rryn's wrist sent it hurtling across the room. Ool scooped it up—a strange sort of gun—and stood ready to aid Rryn. But it was no longer necessary for Rryn had pinned the other's arms behind him and now forced him to his feet. He was a dark, squat Martian, who looked like a malevolent frog.

"Gilk!" The name broke from Ool's incredulous lips.

"Gilk," Rryn agreed. "The only person who had reason to hate you and was clever enough to think up such a fiendish plot. Too clever, really, to be caught in such a simple trap, with you two doing your best to give it away. We were lucky that he was mad with hate, so he didn't notice." He called out and two guards came into the room, one from the door and the other through the broken window. Behind them came the members of the committee.

"Here's our murderer," Rryn told them. "It shouldn't be hard to prove that he killed the others now that we saw him try to kill Ryaa and Ool."

"Not Ool," Gilk snarled. "I didn't want him to die. Only her. Ool would have stayed alive to suffer again."

"But why?" Ool asked. "We were friends."

"Friends!" Gilk spat the word at him. "After all that you did to me. I invented Gilkite—I alone—the only thing powerful enough to halt an entire invasion force. But you received all the glory."

"Because you were a coward," Ryaa cried, stepping in front of Ool. "You ran away and left him to face the entire fleet alone."

"I wasn't a coward," Gilk told her in a hurt tone. "There was always a chance that something might go wrong; that it might not stop them. Patrol Commanders are plentiful enough; Ool could have been

replaced. But there is only one Gilk. No one could have replaced me." His voice rose to a shriek. "Then Ool took all the credit, and they laughed at me. But their great hero isn't a hero any longer."

"You arranged all that, didn't you?" Rryn asked.

"Of course I arranged it. No one else would be clever enough. But for me it was simple. A little preparation of mine, slipped into the bride's clothing or perfume. Just a matter of timing. But this time I couldn't get to her things ahead of time. I suppose that was your idea. I had to come and do it myself. And I will!"

With a swift motion he slipped from Rryn's grasp. A needle glittered in his hand as he threw himself toward Ryaa.

The guards stood helpless. Neither of them could fire without hitting Ryaa. Rryn started forward but Ool was ahead of him. With one hand he sent Ryaa sprawling out of danger. With the other, which still held the gun, he struck Gilk a smashing blow across the face.

The Martian staggered backward, tripped and fell. He screamed once and was still. Rryn bent over him.

"He fell on the needle," he announced. "At least it was quick."

"Now I don't suppose that anyone will ever know how to make Gilkite," one of the guards said as they picked up the body.

"Perhaps it's just as well," said the Oldest Man. "It's too dangerous a secret for anyone to possess. But tell us, Rryn. What made you think of him?"

Rryn smiled.

"The tools of our trades have changed quite a bit through the ages," he said. "But basically people haven't. The First Murderer that we know of killed his brother out of jealousy. It's still an important motive."

"And with the motive established it wasn't hard to find your killer?" said the Oldest Man. "But you also mentioned that when the experiment was over, you thought that Ool might petition the committee to set aside this latest mating."

Rryn glanced at Ool, kneeling beside Ryaa, gathering her into his arms.

"I think we'd better forget that part, sir," he suggested.



DUST UNTO DUST

By LYMAN D. HINCKLEY

It was alien but was it dead, this towering, sinister city of metal that glittered malignantly before the cautious advance of three awed space-scouters.

MARKER on the lifeboat down carefully, with all the attention one usually exercises in a situation where the totally unexpected has occurred, and he and his two companions sat and stared

in awed silence at the city a quarter-mile away.

He saw the dull, black walls of buildings shouldering grimly into the twilight sky, saw the sheared edge where the metal city



ended and the barren earth began . . . and he remembered observing, even before they landed, the too-strict geometry imposed on the entire construction.

He frowned. The first impression was . . . malignant.

Wass, blond and slight, with enough nose for three or four men, unbuckled his safety belt and stood up. "Shall we, gentlemen?" and with a graceful movement of hand and arm he indicated the waiting city.

Martin led Wass, and the gangling, scarecrow-like Rodney, through the stillness overlaying the barren ground. There was

only the twilight sky, and harsh and black against it, the convoluted earth. And the city. Malignant. He wondered, again, what beings would choose to build a city—even a city like this one—in such surroundings.

The men from the ship knew only the surface facts about this waiting geometric discovery. Theirs was the eleventh interplanetary flight, and the previous ten, in the time allowed them for exploration while this planet was still close enough to their own to permit a safe return in their ships, had not spotted the city. But the eleventh expedition had, an hour ago, with just

thirteen hours left during which a return flight could be safely started. So far as was known, this was the only city on the planet—the planet without any life at all, save tiny mosses, for a million years or more. And no matter which direction from the city a man moved, he would always be going north.

"Hey, Martin!" Rodney called through his helmet radio. Martin paused. "Wind," Rodney said, coming abreast of him. He glanced toward the black pile, as if sharing Martin's thoughts. "That's all we need, isn't it?"

Martin looked at the semi-transparent figures of wind and dust cavorting in the distance, moving toward them. He grinned a little, adjusting his radio. "Worried?"

Rodney's bony face was without expression. "Gives me the creeps, kind of. I wonder what they were like."

Wass murmured, "Let us hope they aren't immortal."

Three feet from the edge of the city Martin stopped and stubbed at the sand with the toe of his boot, clearing earth from part of a shining metal band.

Wass watched him, and then shoved aside more sand, several feet away. "It's here, too."

Martin stood up. "Let's try farther on. Rodney, radio the ship, tell them we're going in."

Rodney nodded.

After a time, Wass said, "Here, too. How far do you think it goes?"

Martin shrugged. "Clear around the city? I'd like to know what it is—was—for."

"Defense," Rodney, several yards behind, suggested.

"Could be," Martin said. "Let's go in."

The three crossed the metal band and walked abreast down a street, their broad soft soled boots making no sound on the dull metal. They passed doors and arches and windows and separate buildings. They moved cautiously across five intersections. And they stood in a square surrounded by the tallest buildings in the city.

Rodney broke the silence, hesitantly. "Not—not very big. Is it?"

Wass looked at him shrewdly. "Neither were the—well, shall we call them, people? Have you noticed how low everything is?"

Rodney's laughter rose, too quickly. Then, sobering—"Maybe they crawled."

A nebulous image, product of childhood's vivid imagination, moved slowly across Martin's mind. "All right!" he rapped out—and the image faded.

"Sorry," Rodney murmured, his throat working beneath his lantern jaw. Then—"I wonder what it's like here in the winter when there's no light at all?"

"I imagine they had illumination of some sort," Martin answered, dryly. "If we don't hurry up and get through this place and back to the ship, we're very likely to find out."

Rodney said quickly, "I mean outside."

"Out there, too, Rodney, they must have had illumination." Martin looked back along the straight, metal street they'd walked on, and past that out over the bleak, furrowed slopes where the ship's lifeboat lay . . . and he thought everything outside the city seemed, somehow, from here, a little dim, a little hazy.

He straightened his shoulders. The city was alien, of course, and that explained most of it . . . most of it. But he felt the black city was something familiar, yet twisted and distorted.

"Well," Wass said, his nose wrinkling a bit, "now that we're here . . ."

"Pictures," Martin decided. "We have twelve hours. We'll start here. What's the matter, Wass?"

The blond man grinned ruefully. "I left the camera in the lifeboat." There was a pause. Then Wass, defensively—"It's almost as if the city didn't want to be photographed."

Martin ignored the remark. "Go get it. Rodney and I will be somewhere along this street."

Wass turned away. Martin and Rodney started slowly down the wide metal street, at right angles to their path of entrance.

Again Martin felt a tug of twisted, distorted familiarity. It was almost as if . . . they were human up to a certain point, the point being, perhaps, some part of their minds. . . . Alien things, dark and subtle, things no man could ever comprehend.

Parallel evolution on two inner planets of the same system? Somewhere, sometime, a common ancestor? Martin noted the

shoulder-high doors, the heavier gravity, remembered the inhabitants of the city vanished before the thing that was to become man ever emerged from the slime, and he decided to grin at himself, at his own imagination.

Rodney jerked his scarecrow length about quickly, and a chill sped up Martin's spine. "What's the matter?"

The bony face was white, the gray eyes were wide. "I saw—I thought I saw—something moving—"

Anger rose in Martin. "You didn't," he said flatly, gripping the other's shoulder cruelly. "You couldn't have. Get hold of yourself, man!"

Rodney stared. "The wind. Remember? There isn't any, here."

"... How could there be? The buildings protect us now. It was blowing from the other direction."

Rodney wrenched free of Martin's grip. He gestured wildly. "That—"

"Martin!" Wass' voice came through the receivers in both their radios. "Martin, I can't get out!"

RODNEY mumbled something, and Martin told him to shut up.

Wass said, more quietly, "Remember that metal band? It's all clear now, and glittering, as far as I can see. I can't get across it; it's like a glass wall."

"We're trapped, we're trapped, they are—"

"Shut up, Rodney! Wass, I'm only two sections from the edge. I'll check here."

Martin clapped a hand on Rodney's shoulder again, starting him moving, toward the city's edge, past the black, silent buildings.

The glittering band was here, too, like a halo around a silhouette.

"No go," Martin said to Wass. He bit at his lower lip. "I think it must be all around us." He was silent for a time, exploring the consequences of this. Then—"We'll meet you in the middle of the city, where we separated."

Walking with Rodney, Martin heard Wass' voice, flat and metallic through the radio receiver against his ear. "What do you suppose caused this?"

He shook his head angrily, saying,

"Judging by reports of the rest of the planet, it must have been horribly radioactive at one time. All of it."

"Man-made radiation, you mean."

Martin grinned faintly. Wass, too, had an active imagination. "Well, alien-made, anyhow. Perhaps they had a war."

Wass' voice sounded startled. "Anti-radiation screen?"

Rodney interrupted, "There hasn't been enough radiation around here for hundreds of thousands of years to activate such a screen."

Wass said coldly, "He's right, Martin."

Martin crossed an intersection, Rodney slightly behind him. "You're both wrong," he said. "We landed here today."

Rodney stopped in the middle of the metal street and stared down at Martin. "The wind—?"

"Why not?"

"That would explain why it stopped so suddenly, then." Rodney stood straighter. When he walked again, his steps were firmer.

They reached the center of the city, ahead of the small, slight Wass, and stood watching him labor along the metal toward them.

Wass' face, Martin saw, was sober. "I tried to call the ship. No luck."

"The shield?"

Wass nodded. "What else?"

"I don't know—"

"If we went to the roof of the tallest building," Rodney offered, "we might—"

Martin shook his head. "No. To be effective, the shield would have to cover the city."

Wass stared down at the metal street, as if he could look through it. "I wonder where it gets its power?"

"Down below, probably. If there is a down below." Martin hesitated. "We may have to..."

"What?" Rodney prompted.

Martin shrugged. "Let's look."

He led the way through a shoulder-high arch in one of the tall buildings surrounding the square. The corridor inside was dim and plain, and he switched on his flashlight, the other two immediately following his example. The walls and the rounded ceiling of the corridor were of the same dull metal as the buildings' facades, and the

streets. There were a multitude of doors and arches set into either side of the corridor.

It was rather like . . . entering a gigantic metal beehive.

Martin closed his eyes, with beyond it a metal ramp, which tilted downward, gleaming in the pale circle of his torch.

A call from Rodney halted him. "Back here," the tall man repeated. "It looks like a switchboard."

The three advanced to the end of the central corridor, pausing before a great arch, outlined in the too-careful geometrical figures Martin had come to associate with the city builders. The three torches, shining through the arch, picked out a bank of buttons, handles . . . and a thick rope of cables which ran upward to vanish unexpectedly in the metal roof.

"Is this it," Wass murmured, "or an auxiliary?"

Martin shrugged. "The whole city's no more than a machine, apparently."

"Another assumption," Wass said. "We have done nothing but make assumptions ever since we got here."

"What would you suggest, instead?" Martin asked calmly.

Rodney furtively, extended one hand toward a switch.

"No!" Martin said, sharply. That was one assumption they dared not make.

Rodney turned. "But—"

"No, Wass, how much time have we?"

"The ship leaves in eleven hours."

"Eleven hours," Rodney repeated. "Eleven hours!" He reached out for the switch again. Martin swore, stepped forward, pulled him back roughly.

He directed his flashlight at Rodney's thin, pale face. "What do you think you're doing?"

"We have to find out what all this stuff's for!"

"Going at it blindly, we'd probably execute ourselves."

"We've got to—"

"No!" Then, more quietly— "We still have eleven hours to find a way out."

"Ten hours and forty-five minutes," Wass disagreed softly. "Minus the time it takes us to get to the lifeboat, fly to the ship, land, stow it, get ourselves aboard,

and get the big ship away from the planet. And Captain Morgan can't wait for us, Martin."

"You too, Wass?"

"Up to the point of accuracy, yes."

Martin said, "Not necessarily. You go the way the wind does, always thinking of your own tender hide, of course."

Rodney cursed. "And every second we stand here doing nothing gives us that much less time to find a way out. Martin—"

"Make one move toward that switchboard and I'll stop you where you stand!"

WASS moved silently through the darkness beyond the torches. "We all have guns, Martin."

"I'm holding mine." Martin waited.

After a moment, Wass switched his flashlight back on. He said quietly, "He's right, Rodney. It would be sure death to monkey around in here."

"Well . . ." Rodney turned quickly toward the black arch. "Let's get out of here, then!"

Martin hung back waiting for the others to go ahead of him down the metal hall. At the other arch, where the ramp led downward, he called a halt. "If the dome, or whatever it is, is a radiation screen there must be at least half-a-dozen emergency exits around the city."

Rodney said, "To search every building next to the dome clean around the city would take years."

Martin nodded. "But there must be central roads beneath this main level leading to them. Up here there are too many roads."

Wass laughed rudely.

"Have you a better idea?"

Wass ignored that, as Martin hoped he would. He said slowly, "That leads to another idea. If the band around the city is responsible for the dome, does it project down into the ground as well?"

"You mean dig out?" Martin asked.

"Sure. Why not?"

"We're wearing heavy suits and bulky breathing units. We have no equipment."

"That shouldn't be hard to come by."

Martin smiled, banishing Wass' idea.

Rodney said, "They may have had their digging equipment built right in to themselves."

"Any way," Martin decided, "we can take a look down below."

"In the pitch dark," Wass added.

Martin adjusted his torch, began to lead the way down the metal ramp. The incline was gentle, apparently constructed for legs shorter, feet perhaps less broad than their own. The metal, without mark of any sort, gleamed under the combined light of the torches, unrolling out of the darkness before the men.

At length the incline melted smoothly into the next level of the city.

Martin shined his light upward, and the others followed his example. Metal as smooth and featureless as that on which they stood shone down on them.

Wass turned his light parallel with the floor, and then moved slowly in a circle. "No supports. No supports anywhere. What keeps all that up there?"

"I don't know. I have no idea." Martin gestured toward the ramp with his light. "Does all this, this whole place, look at all familiar to you?"

Rodney's gulp was clearly audible through the radio receivers. "Here?"

"No, no," Martin answered impatiently, "not just here. I mean the whole city."

"Yes," Wass said dryly, "it does. I'm sure this is where all my nightmares stay when they're not on shift."

Martin turned on his heel and started down a metal avenue which, he thought, paralleled the street above. And Rodney and Wass followed him silently. They moved along the metal, past unfamiliar shapes made more so by gloom and moving shadows, past doors dancing grotesquely in the three lights, past openings in the occasional high metal partitions, past something which was perhaps a conveyor belt, past another something which could have been anything at all.

The metal street ended eventually in a blank metal wall.

The edge of the city—the city which was a dome of force above and a bowl of metal below.

After a long time, Wass sighed. "Well, skipper . . . ?"

"We go back, I guess," Martin said.

Rodney turned swiftly to face him.

Martin thought the tall man was holding his gun. "To the switchboard, Martin?"

"Unless someone has a better idea," Martin conceded. He waited. But Rodney was holding the gun . . . and Wass was . . . Then—"I can't think of anything else."

Then began to retrace their steps along the metal street, back past the same dancing shapes of metal, the partitions, the odd windows, all looking different now in the new angles of illumination.

Martin was in the lead. Wass followed him silently. Rodney, tall, matchstick thin, even in his cumbersome suit, swayed with jaunty triumph in the rear.

Martin looked at the metal street lined with its metal objects and he sighed. He remembered how the dark buildings of the city looked at surface level, how the city itself looked when they were landing, and then when they were walking toward it. The dream was gone again for now. Idealism died in him, again and again, yet it was always reborn. But—The only city, so far as anyone knew, on the first planet they'd ever explored. And it had to be like this. Nightmares, Wass said, and Martin thought perhaps the city was built by a race of beings who at some point twisted away from their evolutionary spiral, plagued by a sort of racial insanity.

No, Martin thought, shaking his head. No, that couldn't be. Viewpoint . . . his viewpoint. It was the haunting sense of familiarity, a faint strain through all this broad jumble, the junkpile of alien metal, which was making him theorize so wildly.

Then Wass touched his elbow. "Look there, Martin. Left of the ramp."

Light from their torches was reflected, as from glass.

"All right," Rodney said belligerently into his radio. "What's holding up the procession?"

Martin was silent.

Wass undertook to explain. Why not, after all? Martin asked himself. It was in Wass' own interest. In a moment, all three were standing before a bank of glass cases which stretched off into the distance as far as the combined light of their torches would reach.

"Seeds!" Wass exclaimed, his faceplate pressed against the glass.

Martin blinked. He thought how little time they had. He wet his lips.

Wass' gloved hands fumbled awkwardly at a catch in the nearest section of the bank.

Martin thought of the dark, convoluted land outside the city. If they wouldn't grow there. . . . Or had they, once? "Don't, Wass."

Torchlight reflected from Wass' faceplate as he turned his head. "Why not?"

They were like children. . . . "We don't know, released, what they'll do."

"Skipper," Wass said carefully, "if we don't get out of this place by the deadline we may be eating these."

Martin raised his arm tensely. "Opening a seed bank doesn't help us find a way out of here." He started up the ramp. "Besides, we've no water."

Rodney came last up the ramp, less jaunty now, but still holding the gun. His mind, too, was taken up with childhood's imaginings. "For a plant to grow in this environment, it wouldn't need much water. Maybe—" he had a vision of evil plants attacking them, growing with super-swiftness at the air valves and joints of their suits—"only the little moisture in the atmosphere."

THEY stood before the switchboard again. Martin and Wass side by side, Rodney, still holding his gun, slightly to the rear.

Rodney moved forward a little toward the switches. His breathing was loud and rather uneven in the radio receivers.

Martin made a final effort. "Rodney, it's still almost nine hours to take off. Let's search awhile first. Let this be a last resort."

Rodney jerked his head negatively. "No. Now. I know you, Martin. Postpone and postpone until it's too late, and the ship leaves without us and we're stranded here to eat seeds and gradually dehydrate ourselves and God only knows what else . . ."

He reached out convulsively and yanked a switch.

Martin leaped, knocking him to the floor. Rodney's gun skittered away silently, like a live thing, out of the range of the torches.

The radio receivers impersonally recorded the grating sounds of Rodney's sobs.

"Sorry," Martin said, without feeling. He turned quickly. "Wass?"

The slight, blond man stood unmoving. "I'm with you, Martin, but, as a last resort it might be better to be blown sky high than to die gradually—"

Martin was watching Rodney, struggling to get up. "I agree. As a last resort. We still have a little time."

Rodney's tall, spare figure looked bowed and tired in the torchlight, now that he was up again. "Martin, I—"

Martin turned his back. "Skip it, Rodney," he said gently.

"Water," Wass said thoughtfully. "There must be reservoirs under this city somewhere."

Rodney said, "How does water help us get out?"

Martin glanced at Wass, then started out of the switchboard room, not looking back. "It got in and out of the city some way. Perhaps we can leave the same way."

Down the ramp again.

"There's another ramp," Wass murmured.

Rodney looked down it. "I wonder how many there are, all told."

Martin placed one foot on the metal incline. He angled his torch down, picking out shadowy, geometrical shapes, duplicates of the ones on the present level. "We'll find out," he said, "how many there are."

Eleven levels later Rodney asked, "How much time have we now?"

"Seven hours," Wass said quietly, "until take-off."

"One more level," Martin said, ignoring the reference to time. "I . . . think it's the last."

They walked down the ramp and stood together, silent in a dim pool of artificial light on the bottom level of the alien city.

Rodney played his torch about the metal figures carefully placed about the floor. "Martin, what if there are no reservoirs? What if there are cemeteries instead? Or cold storage units? Maybe the switch I pulled—"

Rodney's "Stop it!"

Rodney swallowed audibly. "This place scares me . . ."

"The first time I was ever in a rocket, it scared me, I was thirteen."

"This is different," Wass said. "Built-in traps."

"They had a war," Martin said.

Wass agreed. "And the survivors retired here. Why?"

Martin said, "They wanted to rebuild. Or maybe this was already built before the war as a retreat." He turned impatiently. "How should I know?"

Wass turned, too, persistent. "But the planet was through with them."

"In a minute," Martin said, too irritably, "we'll have a sentient planet." From the corner of his eye he saw Rodney start at that. "Knock it off, Wass. We're looking for reservoirs, you know."

They moved slowly down the metal avenue, between the twisted shadow shapes, looking carefully about them.

Rodney paused. "We might not recognize

Martin urged him on. "You know what a man-hole cover looks like." He added dryly, "Use your imagination."

They reached the metal wall at the end of the avenue and paused again, uncertain.

Martin swung his flashlight, illuminating the distorted metal shapes.

Wass said, "All this had a purpose, once . . ."

"We'll disperse and search carefully," Martin said.

"I wonder what the pattern was."

". . . The reservoirs, Wass. The pattern will still be here for later expeditions to study. So will we if we don't find a way to get out."

Their radios recorded Rodney's gasp. Then—"Martin! Martin! I think I've found something!"

Martin began to run. After a moment's hesitation, Wass swung in behind him.

"Here," Rodney said, as they came up to him, out of breath. "Here. See? Right here."

Three flashlights centered on a dark, metal disk raised a foot or more from the floor.

"Well, they had hands." With his torch Wass indicated a small wheel of the same metal as everything else in the city, set beside the disk.

From its design Martin assumed that the disk was meant to be grasped and turned.

He wondered what precisely they were standing over.

"Well, Skipper, are you going to do the honors?"

Martin kneeled, grasped the wheel. It turned easily—almost too easily—rotating the disk as it turned.

Suddenly, without a sound, the disk rose, like a hatch, on a concealed hinge.

The three men, clad in their suits and helmets, grouped around the six-foot opening, shining their torches down into the thing that drifted and eddied directly beneath them.

Rodney's sudden grip on Martin's wrist nearly shattered the bone. "Martin! It's all alive! It's moving!"

Martin hesitated long enough for a coil to move sinuously up toward the opening. Then he spun the wheel and the hatch slammed down.

He was shaking.

ATTER a time he said, "Rodney, Wass, it's dust, down there. Remember the wind? Air currents are moving it."

Rodney sat down on the metal flooring. For a long time he said nothing. Then—"It wasn't. . . . Why did you close the hatch then?"

Martin did not say he thought the other two would have shot him, otherwise. He said merely, "At first I wasn't sure myself."

Rodney stood up, backing away from the closed hatch. He held his gun loosely, and his hand shook. "Then prove it. Open it again."

Martin went to the wheel. He noticed Wass was standing behind Rodney and he, too, had drawn his gun.

The hatch rose again at Martin's direction. He stood beside it, outlined in the light of two torches.

For a little while he was alone.

Then—causing a gasp from Wass, a harsh expletive from Rodney—a tenuous, questing alien limb edged through the hatch, curling about Martin, sparkling in ten thousand separate particles in the torchlight, obscuring the dimly seen backdrop of geometrical processions of strange objects.

Martin raised an arm, and the particles swirled in stately, shimmering spirals.

Rodney leaned forward and looked over

the edge of the hatch. He said nothing. He eyed the sparkling particles swirling about Martin, and now, himself.

"How deep," Wass said, from his safe distance.

"We'll have to lower a flashlight," Martin answered.

Rodney, all eagerness to be of assistance now, lowered a rope with a torch swinging wildly on the end of it.

The torch came to rest about thirty feet down. It shone on gently rolling mounds of fine, white stuff.

Martin anchored the rope soundly, and paused, half across the lip of the hatch to stare coldly at Wass. "You'd rather monkey with the switches and blow yourself to smithereens?"

Wass sighed and refused to meet Martin's gaze. Martin looked at him disgustedly, and then began to descend the rope, slowly, peering into the infinite, sparkling darkness pressing around him. At the bottom of the rope he sank to his knees in dust, and then was held even. He stamped his feet, and then, as well as he was able, did a standing jump. He sank no farther than his knees.

He sighted a path parallel with the avenue above, toward the nearest edge of the city. "I think we'll be all right," he called out, "as long as we avoid the drifts."

Rodney began the descent. Looking up, Martin saw Wass above Rodney.

"All right, Wass," Martin said quietly, as Rodney released the rope and sank into the dust.

"Not me," the answer came back quickly. "You two fools go your way, I'll go mine."

"Wass!"

There was no answer. The light faded swiftly away from the opening.

The going was hard. The dust clung like honey to their feet, and eddied and swirled about them until the purifying systems in their suits were hard-pressed to remove the fine stuff working in at joints and valves.

"Are we going straight?" Rodney asked.

"Of course," Martin growled.

There was silence again, the silence of almost-exhausted determination. The two men lifted their feet out of the dust, and then laboriously plunged forward, to sink again to the knees, repeated the act,

times without number.

Then Wass broke his silence, taunting. "The ship leaves in two hours, Martin. Two hours. Hear me, Rodney?"

Martin pulled his left foot from the sand and growled deep in his throat. Ahead, through the confusing patterns of the sparkling dust, his flashlight gleamed against metal. He grabbed Rodney's arm, pointed.

A grate.

Rodney stared. "Wass!" he shouted. "We've found a way out!"

Their radios recorded Wass' laughter. "I'm at the switchboard now, Martin. I—"

There was a tinkle of breaking glass, breaking faceplate.

The grate groaned upward and stopped.

Wass babbled incoherently into the radio for a moment, and then he began to scream.

Martin switched off his radio, sick.

He turned it on again when they reached the opening in the metal wall. "Well?"

"I've been trying to get you," Rodney said, frantically. "Why didn't you answer?"

"We couldn't do anything for him."

Rodney's face was white and drawn. "But he did this for us."

"So he did," Martin said, very quietly.

Rodney said nothing.

Then Martin said, "Did you listen until the end?"

Rodney nodded, jerkily. "He pulled three more switches. I couldn't understand it all. But— Martin, dying alone like that in a place like this—!"

Martin crawled into the circular pipe behind the grate. It tilted up toward the surface. "Come on, Rodney. Last lap."

An hour later they surfaced about two hundred yards away from the edge of the city. Behind them the black pile rose, the dome of force shimmering, almost invisible, about it.

Ahead of them were the other two scoutships from the mother ship. Martin called out faintly, pulling Rodney out of the pipe. Crew members standing by the scoutships, and at the edge of the city, began to run toward them.

"Radio picked you up as soon as you entered the pipe," someone said. It was the last thing Martin heard before he collapsed.

ALIEN EQUIVALENT

By RICHARD R. SMITH

Martians were weak, sensitive, a dying race, frail and impotent before the superiority of master Earthmen. Only in the sly and mentally skillful game of Duchal might sons of the red planet emerge gloriously from their shells.

CHESTER FARRELL emerged from the narrow alley and paused before the barbed wire fence.

Behind him, the Martian city was a maze of strange sounds, angular buildings, acrid odors and dark shadows.

Before him, beyond the fence, three spaceships pointed their bows toward a star-studded sky. The slender ships gleamed dully in the starlight as they rested on the red desert.

He touched the money in his pocket to reassure himself that at last, he had the fare for the trip to Earth.

His eyes scanned the heavens, searched for the bright light that was Earth.

Earth! In itself, the planet meant little to him. The seas, mountains, valleys and forests did not cause the burning desire inside him.

He closed his eyes and remembered a brick house in Cleveland and the brown-haired woman and chubby boy who lived there. He recalled slender, soft fingers that touched him gently and a small form that waddled uncertainly across their living room floor.

Three years ago, he had left Louise and Sammy on Earth. He had come to Mars to make a small fortune.

The dream had not materialized: the Mars Mining Corporation didn't want to pay their employees good salaries although the ores transported to Earth sold for tremendous profits. They paid their employees as little as possible.

It was simple: Governments wanted colonists on Mars to exploit the planet. Mars Mining wanted colonists to remain and operate their mines. The two groups, political

and business, collaborated and . . . while the trip to Mars cost only a hundred dollars, the return trip to Earth cost one thousand dollars.

Because of the high price of living on Mars and the low salaries, the fee was an encouragement to remain on the planet.

It had taken him three years to save enough money to rejoin his family.

Bitterness filled him as he studied the motionless ships. Convertible spaceships. The bulkheads inside the hull were collapsible and the space in a ship was constantly adjusted into different size storage holds and passenger compartments.

During the voyage to Earth, he would be the only passenger and would occupy a coffin-like compartment. Every other available foot of space would be filled with valuable ores.

When the ship returned to Mars, the passenger compartments would be spacious, luxurious and comfortable. They would be filled with hundreds of propaganda-fed, eager colonists who were unaware of the economic trap before them.

As he turned and followed the fence toward the spaceport's office buildings he heard the faint sounds behind him.

A whisper of movement across the red sand.

An animal?

He glanced uneasily at the tiny lights from the office buildings. In the thin atmosphere, light carried a long distance and was deceptive. The lights seemed near but he knew he still had a fifteen minute walk ahead of him.

Once more he heard the indefinable sound behind him.



His imagination?

A Martian?

An Earthman, a sound of harsh breathing informed him.

H HE LEAPED to one side as the sounds neared his back.

Too late. Something crashed into the side of his head and bright lights danced gaily inside his skull.

He fell and rolled frantically across the soft sand.

As he scrambled to his feet he saw his attacker, a husky, powerfully built man. A blackjack dangled loosely from a hand.

Before he could rise a knee struck him on the chest. He sank to the ground.

The man was on him, pinning him to the sand.

Farrell's nostrils were filled with the pungent, staid body odor.

A knife glittered in the starlight as it was pressed gently against his throat.

"Tell me where the money is," the man ordered. "It'll save time."

Too stunned to speak, Farrell nodded at his coat pocket.

The man removed the money and counted rapidly, somehow managing to keep the knife in his hand while he flipped the bills.

Satisfied, he stuffed the bills in a pocket and raised the knife for a fatal lunge.

His arms pinned at his sides by the man's knees, Farrell knew only one thing could save him: WORDS.

"I can get you five times that much," he said quickly, the words crowding each other in their haste.

It worked: the knife wavered, hesitated. If he had screamed, "Don't kill me!" he would have been killed instantly but the simple statement had aroused his assailant's curiosity.

"Five times that much?" the man repeated gruffly.

Phobos, the largest and closest of the two moons, moved visibly across the dark sky. Suddenly, they were no longer in the shadow of a building. Moonlight flowed across the man's face and for the first time, he saw his features.

He looked up at a rough, almost brutal face with thick lips, fierce eyes, blunt, broken nose and bushy eyebrows.

"Five thousand dollars," Farrell confirmed.

"Where?"

"Dankor city. You've heard of a Martian game called rhakal?"

He frowned. "Yeah, I heard of it. I also heard Earthmen don't win very often."

"I won," Farrell told him. "Five thousand. I spent most of it but I saved the thousand to go back to Earth. If you don't kill me, I'll win five thousand for you."

His adversary grinned wryly and lowered the knife toward Farrell's throat. "This sounds like a trick."

"Trick? How can I trick you? Dankor is off limits to Earthmen. You and I will be the only—"

The man cocked his head and asked, "You have any Martian friends in Dankor?"

Farrell laughed at the thought, "Martian friends?"

Some of the wariness left the other's face.

Everyone knew no Earthman had a Martian friend. The Martians were a fading but proud race. They resented Earthmen and submitted bitterly to their presence. Martians did not associate with Earthmen. To do so would mean loss of social standing and almost always loss of their lives by the hand of some fanatical anti-Earth group.

Martians submitted to the invasion of their planet by colonists because they had no choice: they were few in number, a weak, dying race. Inwardly, they hated Earthmen and, given the chance, would rid Mars of all colonists.

While his antagonist considered the offer, Farrell's mind whirled rapidly. How could he escape? His body was trapped beneath the man's weight, unable to move. Call for help? He quickly discarded the idea: on one side was a Martian city and on the other was the spaceport. The group of crude stone buildings were inhabited by aliens. Martians might come and watch him die if he called for help but they'd never try to save him. The spaceport was deserted except for the empty, waiting spaceships and the office buildings were too far away for anyone to hear a cry.

He could do nothing.

"I'll give you a chance," his enemy said as he rose to his feet. "You win five thou-

sand for me and I'll let you have the thousand and your life." He placed the knife in a sheath and drew a stubby revolver from a pocket. "If you make a wrong move, I'll blast you in half. I don't like to use this thing because it's noisy, but—" He waved the gun and the action seemed to complete the sentence in itself.

"LET'S take a taxi," Farrell suggested as he rose shakily and brushed red sand from his clothes.

"No."

"It'll take an hour to walk there," Farrell protested mildly.

"We'll walk," the man stated. "We'll walk and we'll take the most deserted streets."

Farrell led the way through the small Martian city that bordered the spaceport and across a narrow stretch of desert to Dankor canal.

At the canal, he turned and followed it northward, walking on the huge, weather-smoothed stones that formed one wall of the large waterway.

Thousands of feet below them, muddy water gurgled roaringly as it moved southward to the Martian farmlands. In the clear atmosphere, the opposite wall of the canal ten miles away was a thin, dark line.

"What's your name?" Farrell asked suddenly.

"Tharp."

"Where do you work?"

"None of your business."

They walked in silence, the two moons casting double shadows from each of their bodies.

With a sinking sensation in his stomach, Farrell realized the odds were against his seeing his family again.

"How did you learn I had the money?" Farrell asked.

Tharp grinned broadly. "When anyone makes a reservation on the flight to Earth, the news gets around. It got around to me." His laughter sounded brittle in the thin atmosphere.

After what seemed like years, they arrived at the outskirts of Dankor. Although it was off-limits, the police patrolled infrequently and even those patrols were publicly known schedules.

Dankor was a small cluster of low crumbling buildings. The streets were littered with filth and pale Martians dressed in rags shuffled aimlessly with blank eyes as if their world had already died.

Jars of brilliant fireflies on roof tops illuminated the village. Imprisoned in the transparent containers, the fluttering insects cast an eerie, pulsating glow on the dismal buildings.

Farrell paused before a thick wooden door and kicked it with his right foot. "The first time I came here," he explained, "I almost broke my knuckles before they heard me."

A few minutes later, the door opened.

"Come in," a bony, wizened Martian invited.

Tharp remained a few paces behind Farrell as they entered the room.

The stench of the place made their stomachs churn sickly.

A group of listless Martians sat in the center of the floor and watched a large cube-shaped object. Two Martians on opposite sides of the cube sat before small control panels.

The Earthmen watched as one Martian touched a button on his control panel. A green ball inside the cube rose a few inches.

The other Martian pushed a button and a brown ball at the top of the hollow cube dropped a few inches.

A thin Martian with grey hair and watery eyes asked, "You vish gamble?"

Farrell nodded his head affirmatively.

The Martian smiled weakly and inquired in broken English, "Vhot is vager? Monee or duchal?"

"What in hell is duchal?" Tharp asked.

"It's hard to explain," Farrell confessed.

"But, we'll have to wait until those Martians are through and you'll see what duchal is when they finish."

Farrell squatted on the cold floor.

Tharp sat two yards to one side.

Silently they watched the Martian gamblers.

Several minutes later the emaciated aliens rose from their positions behind the small control boards.

"Is the game over?" Tharp asked.

"Yes. See the Martian with the green tunic? He's the one who lost the game. The

winner will receive a certain measure of duchal.

THARP watched intently as a strange machine was brought into the room. The two gamblers sat close to each other. A third Martian attached electrodes to their heads, then flipped a lever on the ancient, rusty machine.

The Martian who lost the game grimaced with pain.

A needle on the machine's single dial moved all the way to the right, then quickly returned to its original position.

An expression of joy spread the victor's thin lips into a wide smile.

A few seconds later, the electrodes were removed from their heads.

Tharp granted his bafflement.

"Duchal," Farrell explained quickly, "means an expression of sorrow or pain. By means of that machine, the winner was able to receive in his brain the sensation of the loser's physical and mental agony at losing the game."

"That's what they were betting?" Tharp asked unbelievably.

"Yes. It's the same principle as humans who play games merely for the disappointed expression on the loser's face. The Martians do it a little differently: they have a machine that transmits the loser's pain into the victor's brain. The Martians are constructed in such a way that the agony of another person, implanted in their minds, is very pleasant to them."

"They must be crazy!"

Farrell shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe. Anyway, you have a choice. You can bet the thousand dollars or a certain amount of duchal."

"If we bet duchal and lost, we'd only have to pay the Martians a little . . . sensation of agony at losing the game?"

"Right."

Tharp laughed. "Hell, let's bet duchal. That'd be better than losing a thousand bucks if we should lose the game." He slipped his hand into a pocket and the cloth bulged in Farrell's direction. "And we'd better win!"

What's the difference? Farrell thought. *If we win or lose, you'll kill me. You can't leave me alive to report you to the police!*

"You can play the game," Farrell suggested. "I'll tell you what buttons to push."

"Okay. Tell the Martians we want to bet an amount of duchal worth five thousand. How much would that be on the dial on that gimmick?"

Farrell pointed at the graduation to the extreme right of the dial. "See that line? That would be worth five thousand in duchal. The same amount the Martian bet."

Tharp smiled as he remembered how easily the Martian gambler had paid that amount of duchal. If they lost the game, he'd have no trouble paying the gambling debt.

"Five thousand," Farrell told the waiting Martian. "We'll bet duchal."

The Martian smiled happily, disappeared for a few minutes and returned with a large bag.

Without ceremony he spilled the contents on the stone floor.

Tharp gasped when he saw the golden earrings, cups, anklets, rings and bracelets studded with diamonds. They were easily worth more than eight thousand dollars.

"Why the hell are they living in dumps like this when they have that kind of stuff? They could buy—" He hesitated as if the incompleting sentence indicated an infinite list of articles.

"It means nothing to them," Farrell explained. "They have a different monetary system. Most Martians are so poor, even the rich ones can't buy anything more valuable than food, clothes and shelter. And the Martians are too stubborn to trade with Earthmen."

He reflected idly that on all of Mars the only place where the two races associated was in gambling rooms like this. Even there, the Martians' attitude was stiff and business-like.

The group of aliens shuffled about uneasily, impatient for the game to begin.

"You ready to start?" Farrell asked.

"Sure."

"THE object of the game is to get those balls at the top of the cube to the bottom level. The Martian will try to get the ones at the bottom to the top. The balls are governed by the control panels. It's like three dimension Chinese checkers."

"Sasush rhakol," a Martian said loudly.

"The game has started. Push the top green button."

Tharp thrust with a grimy finger.

The game lasted several minutes. Each time it was their turn to move, Farrell told Tharp what button to push. Even while the game progressed, the husky man watched Farrell out of the corners of his eyes. Farrell realized that even with the distraction of the game, he'd have no chance to launch a surprise attack on his enemy.

Finally the Martian gambler rose. His colorless lips spread in a wide grin of anticipation.

"We lost!" Tharp exclaimed.

Farrell agreed, "We lost. Anyway, all we lost was a little duchal."

The Martians gathered around the two Earthmen; attached electrodes from the alien machine to Tharp's head.

Three minutes later, Tharp still sat with the electrodes attached to his skull. The Martians were impatient.

"What's the matter?" Tharp inquired angrily. "The game between the Martians, it only took the loser a few seconds to pay the duchal!"

"That's right," Farrell agreed. "But look at the dial."

Tharp stared at the motionless instrument.

"Duchal is an expression of mental or physical agony," Farrell reminded him. "Concentrate and feel sorry you lost."

He assumed a thoughtful expression. The indicator wavered slightly.

"Not so good. See, there are ten graduations on the dial. The needle has to touch the tenth before you pay the amount of duchal you owe. So far, the needle hasn't passed the first graduation. In other words, you haven't paid a tenth of the duchal!"

Tharp drew his revolver.

The Martians did not like the sight of a gun in an Earthman's hand. They had no way of knowing that it was meant for Farrell and not themselves. A dozen aliens threw themselves on Tharp and quickly disarmed him.

Ten Martians held an outraged Tharp motionless while an eleventh removed alien

handcuffs from his tunic and placed pairs around his wrists and ankles.

Farrell recovered his money.

"Martians aren't thieves," he informed the angry man who struggled in vain at the metal bindings. "And therefore, they like to see everyone pay their debts. They'll keep you here until you pay the wager. You see, by being behind the control board and pushing the buttons, you're the one who has to pay the duchal although I told you what buttons to push."

"A trick!" Tharp screamed.

Tharp's face reddened. "You won't get far," he threatened. "I'll pay this duchal in a few minutes; they'll let me free and I'll—"

"You don't realize," Farrell interrupted, "Martians are sickly, sensitive people and they're adept at projecting sensations of agony from their brains. On the other hand, Earthmen are strong physically and know nothing about projecting physical or mental pain."

He paused to watch three Martians who removed gleaming, sharp knives from their tunics.

They pressed the blades against Tharp's arms.

The knives cut through his coat, shirt and flesh. The cloth reddened quickly.

"They want their duchal payment," Farrell informed him. "They'll get it if they have to slice you to ribbons."

Tharp's wild eyes stared at the dial before him. The needle touched the second graduation, then settled to the "O" position.

"You see," Farrell continued, "it's a matter of equivalent. Earthmen are so strong, they have to really *suffer* physically before they can match a duchal payment that a Martian can create as easy as snapping his fingers!"

Once more, the glittering knives bit into Tharp's flesh.

He screamed with pain.

"Get help! Get help before they kill me!"

Farrell went for help.

But, once beyond the thick door that suddenly suffocated Tharp's shrill screams of pain, he didn't run for help.

He walked slowly.

LAST CALL FOR SECTOR 9G

By LEIGH BRACKETT

Out there in the green star system; far beyond the confining grip of the Federation, moved the feared Bitter Star, for a thousand frigid years the dark and sinister manipulator of war-weary planets.

ARTIE said monotonously, "There is someone at the door sir shall I answer? There is someone at the door sir shall I—"

Durham grunted. What he wanted to was go away and let me alone. But he'd only grant, and Artie kept repeating stupid question. Artie was a cheap off-brand make, and bought used, and he lacked some cogs. Any first class servall would have seen that the master had passed out in his chair and was in no condition to receive guests. But Artie did not, and presently Durham got one eye open and then he began to hear the persistent knocking, the annunciator being naturally out of order. And he said quite clearly.

"If it's a creditor, I'm not in."

"—shall I answer?"

Durham made a series of noises. Artie took them for an affirmative and trundled off. Durham put his face in his hands and struggled with the pangs of returning consciousness. He could hear a mutter of voices in the hall. He thought suddenly that he recognized them, and he sprang, or rather stumbled up in alarm, hastily combing his hair with his fingers and trying to pull the wrinkles out of his tunic. Through a thick haze he saw the bottle on the table and he picked it up and hid it under a chair, ashamed not of its emptiness but of its label. A gentleman should not be drunk on stuff like that.

Paulsen and Burke came in.

Durham stood stiffly beside the table, hanging on. He looked at the two men. "Well," he said. "It's been quite a long time." He turned to Artie. "The gentlemen are leaving."

Burke stepped quickly behind the servall

and pushed the main toggle to OFF. Artie stopped, with a sound ridiculously like a tired sigh. Paulsen went past him and locked the door. Then both of them turned again to face Durham.

Durham scowled. "What the devil do you think you're doing?"

Burke and Paulsen glanced at each other, as though resolve had carried them this far but had now run out, leaving them irresolute in the face of some distasteful task. Both men wore black dominos, with the cowls thrown back.

"Were you afraid you'd be recognized coming here?" Durham said. A small pulse of fright began to beat in him, and this was idiotic. It made him angry. "What do you want?"

Paulsen said in a reluctant voice, not looking at him, "I don't want anything, Durham, believe me." Durham had once been engaged to Paulsen's sister, a thing both of them preferred not to remember but couldn't quite forget. He went on, "We were sent here."

Durham tried to think who might have sent them. Certainly not any of the girls; certainly not any one of the people he owed money to. Two members of the Terran World Embassy corps, even young and still obscure members in the lower echelons, were above either of those missions.

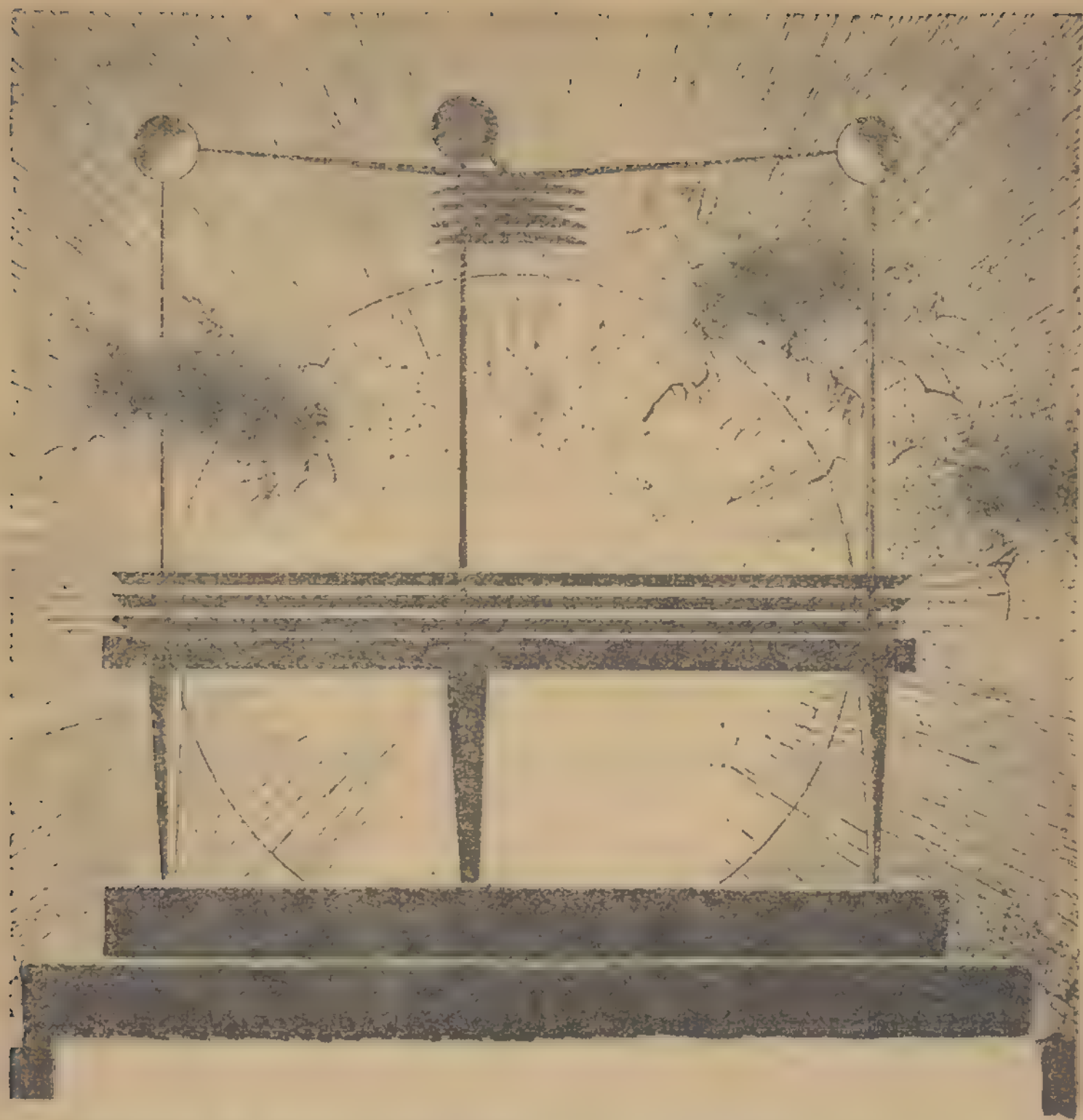
"Who sent you?"

Burke said, "Hawtree."

"No," said Durham. "Oh no, you got the name wrong. Hawtree wouldn't send for me if I was the last man in the galaxy. Hawtree, indeed."

"Hawtree," said Paulsen. He drew a deep breath and threw aside his domino. "Come on, Burke."





Burke took off his domino. They came on together.

Durham drew back. His shoulders dropped and his fists came up. "Look out," he said. "What you going to do? Look out!"

"All right," said Burke, and they both jumped together and caught his arms, not because Durham was so big or so powerful that he frightened them, but because they disliked the idea of brawling with a drunken man. Paulsen said,

"Hawtree wants you tonight, and he wants you sober, and that, damn it, is the way he's going to get you."

AN HOUR and seven minutes later Durham sat beside Paulsen in a 'copter with no insigne and watched the roof of his apartment tower fall away beneath him.

Burke had stayed behind, and Durham wore the Irishman's domino with the cowl up over his head. Under the domino was his good suit, the one he had not sent to the pawnbroker because he could not, as yet, quite endure being without one good suit. He was scrubbed and shaved and perfectly sober. Outside he did not look too bad. Inside he was a shambles.

The 'copter fitted itself into a north-south lane. Paulsen, muffled in his cowl, sat silent. Durham felt a similar reluctance to speak. He looked out over The Hub, and tried to keep from thinking. Don't run to meet it, don't get your hopes up. Whatever it is, let it happen, quietly.

The city was beautiful. Its official name was Galactic Center, but it was called The Hub because that is what it was, the hub

and focus of a galaxy. It was the biggest city in the Milky Way. It covered almost the entire land area of the third planet of a Type G star that someone with a sense of humor had christened Pax. The planet was chosen originally because it was centrally located and had no inhabitants, and because it was within the limits of tolerance for the humanoid races. The others mostly needed special accommodations anyway.

And so from a sweet green airy world with nothing on it but trees and grass and a few mild-natured animals The Hub had grown to have a population of something like ten billion people, spread horizontally and stacked up vertically and dug in underneath, and every one of them was engaged in some governmental function, or in espionage, or in both. Intrigue was as much a part of life in The Hub as corpuscles are a part of blood. The Hub boasted that it was the only inhabited world in space where no single grain of wheat or saddle of mutton was grown, where nothing was manufactured and nobody worked at a manual job.

Durham loved it passionately.

Both moons were in the sky now. One was small and low, like a white pearl hung just out of reach. The other was enormous. It had an atmosphere, and it served as storehouse and supply base for the planet city, handling the billions of tons of shipping that kept it going. The two of them made a glorious spectacle overhead, but Durham did not bother to see them. The vast glow of the city paled them, made them unimportant. He was remembering how he had seen it when he was fresh from Earth, for the first time—the supreme capital, beside which the world capitals were only toy cities, the heart and center of the galaxy where the decisions were made and the great men came and went. He was remembering how he had felt, how he had been so sure of the future that he never gave it a second thought.

But something happened.

"What?"

Liquor, they said.

No, not liquor, the hell with them, I could always carry my drinks.

Liquor, they said, and the accident.

The accident. Well, what of it? Didn't

other people have accidents? And anyway, nobody really got hurt out of it. He didn't, and the girl didn't—what if she wasn't his fiancee?—and the confidential file he had in the 'copter hadn't fallen into anybody's hands. So there wasn't anything to that.

No. Not liquor and not the accident, no matter what they said. It was Hawtree, and a personal grudge because he, Durham, had had Hawtree's daughter out with him in the 'copter that night. And so what? He was only engaged to Willa Paulsen, not married to her, and anyway Susan Hawtree knew what she was doing. She knew darn well.

Hawtree, a grudge, and a little bad luck. That's what happened. And that's all.

The 'copter swerved and dropped onto a private landing stage attached to a penthouse. Durham knew it well, though he hadn't seen it for over a year. He got out, aware of palpitations and a gone feeling in the knees. He needed a drink, but he knew that he would have to go inside first and he forced himself to stand up and walk beside Paulsen as though nothing had ever happened. The head high, the face proud and calm, just a touch of bitterness but not too much.

Hawtree was alone in the living room. He glanced at Durham as he came in through the long glass doors. There was a servall standing in the corner, and Hawtree said to it, "A drink for the gentleman, straight and stiff."

A small anger stirred in Durham. Hawtree might at least have given him the choice. He said sharply, "No thanks."

Hawtree said, "Don't be a fool." He looked tired, but then he always had. Tired and keyed up, full of the drive and the brittle excitement of one who has juggled peoples and nations, expressed as black marks on sheets of varicolored paper, for so long that it has become a habit as necessary and destructive as hashish. To Paulsen he said, "I'll ring when I need you."

Paulsen went out. The servall placed the drink in Durham's hand. He did not refuse it.

"Sit down," said Hawtree, and Durham sat. Hawtree dismissed the servall. Durham drank part of his drink and felt better.

"Well," he said, "I'm listening."

"You were a great disappointment to me, Durham."

"What am I supposed to say to that?"

"Nothing. Go ahead, finish your drink, I want to talk to a man, not a zombie."

Durham finished it angrily. "If you brought me all the way here to shake your finger at me, I'm going home again." That was what he said aloud. Inside, he wanted to get down and embrace Hawtree's knees and beg him for another chance.

"I brought you here," said Hawtree, "to offer you a job. If you do it, it might mean that certain doors could be opened for you again."

Durham sat perfectly still. For a moment he did not trust himself to speak. Then he said, "I'll take it."

Certain doors. That's what I've waited for, living like a bum, dodging creditors, hocking my shoes, waiting for those doors to open again.

HE TRIED not to show how he felt, sitting stiffly at ease in the chair, but a red flush began to burn in his cheeks and his hands moved. About time. About time, damn you, Hawtree, that you remembered me.

Damn you, oh damn you for making me sweat so long!

Hawtree said, "Did you ever hear of Nanta Dik?"

"No. What is it?"

"A planet. It belongs to a green star system, chart designation KL421, Sub-sector 9G, Sector 80, Quadrant 7. It's a very isolated system, the only inhabited one in 9G, as a matter of fact, 9G is a Terran quota sector, and since Nanta Dik is humanoid, it's become headquarters for our nationals who are engaged in business in that sub-sector."

Durham nodded. Unassimilated territory lying outside the Federation was divided among Federation members, allowing them to engage in trade only in their allotted sectors and subject to local law and license. This eliminated competitive friction between Federation worlds, threw open new areas to development, and eventually—usually under the sponsorship of the federated world—brought the quota sectors into the vast family of suns that had already spread

over more than half the galaxy. There were abuses now and again, but on the whole, as a system, it worked pretty well.

"I take it that Nanta Dik is where I'm going."

"Yes. Now listen. First thing in the morning, go and book a third-class passage to Earth on the *Sylvania Merchant*, leaving on the day following. Let your friends know you're going home. They won't be surprised."

"Don't rub it in."

"Sorry. When you reach the spaceport, walk across the main rotunda to the newsstand. Drop your ticket and your passport, folded together, go on to the newsstand and wait. They will be returned to you by a uniformed attendant, only your passport will be in a different name and your ticket will now be on a freighter outbound for Nanta Dik. You will then embark at once. Is that all clear?"

"Everything but the reason."

"I'll come to that. How good is your memory?"

"As good as it ever was."

"All right. When you reach Nanta Dik a man will meet you as you leave the ship. He will ask if you are the ornithologist. You will say yes. Then—pay close attention to this—you will say, *The darkbirds will soon fly*. Got that?"

"The darkbirds will soon fly. Simple enough. What's it mean?"

"9G is a rich sector, isolated, improperly policed, underpopulated. There has been a certain amount of trouble, poaching, claim jumping, outright piracy. The 'darkbirds' are a couple of suspected ships. We want to set a trap for them, and you know how things are on The Hub. If a man buys a pair of socks, the news is all across the galaxy in a week. That's the reason for all the secrecy."

"Is that all?"

"No." Hawtree got up, turning his back on Durham. He said harshly, "Listen, Lloyd." It was the first time he had used Durham's Christian name. "This is an important job. It may not seem like one, but it is. Do it. There's somebody else who wanted you to have another chance."

Durham did not say anything. He waited for Hawtree to turn around and face him

and say the name. But he didn't, and finally Durham said,

"See me?"

"I don't know what she sees in you," said Hawtree, and pushed a button. Paulsen came in. Hawtree jerked a thumb at Durham. "Take him back. And tell Burke to give him the money."

Durham went out and got into the 'copter. He felt dizzy, and this time it was not from drinks or the lack of them. He sat, and Paulsen took the 'copter off.

Hawtree watched it from inside the glass doors until it was out of sight above the roof. And another man came from behind a door that led into Hawtree's private study, and watched it with him.

"Are you sure about him?" asked the

"I know him," Hawtree said. "He's a slob."

"But are you sure?"

"Don't worry, Morrison," Hawtree said. "I know him. He'll talk. Bet you a hundred he never even makes the spaceport."

"Blessed are the fools," said Morrison, "for they shall inherit nothing."

II

BAYA sat on the bed and waited for him back. She was from one of the worlds of Mintaka, and as humanoid as they came, not very tall but very well shaped, and colored one beautiful shade of old bronze from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet, except for her mouth, which was a vivid red.

"It seems funny," she said, "to think of you not being here tomorrow."

"Will you die of missing me?"

"Probably, for a day or two. I was comfortable. I hate upheavals."

Durham reached across her for his small stack of underwear. She was wearing the yellow silk thing that made her skin glow by contrast. He saw that it was dubiously clean about the neck, and when he paused to kiss her he noticed the tiny lines around her mouth and eyes, the indefinable look of wear and hardness that was more destructive to beauty than the mere passing of years. Yesterday they had been two of a kind, part of the vast backwash left be-

hind by other people's successes. Today he was far above her. And he was glad.

"The least you could do," she said, "would be to make this a really big evening. But I suppose you couldn't run to that."

"I've got money." Burke had given him some, but that was for expenses and he would neither mention it nor touch it. "Artie brought a pretty good price, so did the furniture." There was nothing left in the apartment but the bed, and even that was sold. He had bought back a few of his better belongings, and he still had a wad of credits. He felt good. He felt joyous and expansive. He felt like a man again.

He poured two drinks and handed one to Baya.

"All right," he said, "here's to a big last evening. The biggest."

They had cocktails in a bar called The Moonraker because it was the highest point in that hemisphere of the city. It was the hour between sunset and moonrise, when the towers stood sharply defined against a sky of incredible dark blueness, with the brighter stars pricked out in it, and the dim canyons at the feet of the towers were lost in the new night, spectral, soft and lovely. And the night deepened, and the lights came on.

They wandered for a while among the high flung walkways that spanned the upper levels of the towers so that people need not spend half their lives in elevators. They skirted the vast green concourse from which the halls of government rose up white and unadorned and splendid. They only skirted one corner of it, because this galactic Capitol Hill ran for miles, dominating the whole official complex, and one enormous building of it was fitted up so that the non-humanoid Members of Universal Parliament could "attend" the sessions in comfort, never leaving their especially pressurized and congenially poisonous suites. Between humanoid and non-humanoid there were many scientific gradations of form. But for governmental purposes it boiled down simply to oxygen-breather or non-oxygen-breather.

"Human or not," said Durham, standing on an upper span, with the good liquor burning bright inside him, "human or not,

they're only men like me. What they've done, I can do."

"This is dull," said Baya.

"Dull," said Durham. He shook his head in wonderment, staring at her. She was beautiful. Tonight she wore white, and her hair curled softly on her neck, and her mouth was languorous, and her eyes—her eyes were hard. They were always hard, always making a liar out of that pliant, generous mouth. "Dull," he said. "No wonder you never got anywhere."

She flared up at that, and said a few things about him. He knew they were no longer true, so he could afford to be amused by them. He smiled and said,

"Let's not quarrel, Baya. This is good-bye, remember. Come on, we'll have a drink at the Miran."

They floated down on the bright spider web levels of the walkways, drifting east, stopping at the Miran and then going on to another drinking place, and then to another. The walks were thronged with other people, people from hundreds of stars, thousands of worlds. People of an infinite variety of sizes, shapes and colors, dressed in every imaginable and unimaginable fashion. Ambassadors, MP's, wives and mistresses, couriers, calculator jockeys, topologists and graph men, office girls, hairdressers, janitors, pimps, you-name-it. Durham saw them through a golden haze, and loved them, because they were the city and he was a part of them again.

He was out of the backwash of not-being. Hawtree had had to give in, and this footling errand to some dust speck nobody ever heard of was simply a necessary device to save his own face. All right, Hawtree, fine. We will go along with the gag. And you may inform the haughty Miss Hawtree, who can, believe us, be also the naughty Miss Hawtree, that we don't know if we want her back or not. We'll see.

"—take me with you," Baya was saying.

Durham shook his head. "Lone trip, honey. Can't possibly."

"Are you ashamed of me, Lloyd? That's it, you're ashamed to take me to Earth."

"No. No. Now, Baya—"

He looked at her. His vision was a bit blurred by now, he could see just enough

background to wonder how the devil they'd got to this closed-in-looking drinking place. But Baya's face was clear enough. She was crying.

"Now, Baya, honey, it's not that—it's not that at all."

"Then why can't I go with you to Earth?"

"Because—listen, Baya, can you keep a secret?" He laughed, and his own laughter sounded blurred too. "Promise?"

"Promise."

"I—"

DEAD stop. The words rattled on his tongue, but remained unspoken. Why? Was it because of Baya's eyes, that wept tears but had no sorrow in them? He could see them quite clearly, and they were not sorrowful at all, but avid.

"I promised, Lloyd. You can tell me."

There was a table under his hands, with an exotically patterned cloth on it. He had no memory of having sat down at it. There was a wall of plasticoid cement covered with a crude mural in bright primaries. There was a low, vaulted ceiling, also painted. There were no windows.

"How did we get here?" Durham asked stupidly. "It's underground."

"It's just a place," Baya said impatiently. And then she said sharply, "What's the matter with you?"

Blood and fumes hammered together in his bulging temples, and his back felt cold. "Where's the men's room, Baya?"

Her mouth set in anger and disgust. She called, "Varnik!"

A tall powerful man with a very long neck and skin the color of a ripe plum came up to the table. He wore an apron.

Baya said, "Better take him there, Varnik."

The plum colored man took him and ran him to a door and put him through it. From there a servall took over. It was very efficient.

"Are you through, sir?"

"God, no. Not nearly."

One more word and you would have been through. Forever. Drunken blabbermouth Durham, smart aleck Durham, would-be big shot Durham, ready to babble out his secret and blow his last chance of a come-

back. But why did Baya have to be so insistently curious?

Why, indeed?

He began to feel both sick and scared. After a time he made it to the row of basins and splashed cold water on his face and head. There was a mirror above the basin. He looked into it. "Hello, bum," he said.

Face it, Durham. You're a drunken bum. You are exactly what Willa Paulsen said you were, what Susan Hawtree said you were, what they all said you were. You get a second chance, and you go right out and get drunk and blow it. Or, almost. Another minute and you'd have blabbed everything you know to Baya.

Baya, who cried because he wouldn't tell her; who had brought him to this rathole.

He took a clearer look at it when he went shakily out of the men's room. The place was almost empty, and it had a close, smothery feeling. Durham had never liked these underground streets, this vaguely unsavory demi-world that wound itself around the foundations of the city. It was considered smart to go slumming here, but this place was somehow wrong.

There were a man and woman at a table across the room, a young, pale green couple who pretended too carefully not to see him. There was Varnik, the plum colored proprietor, at a tall desk beside the main door. And there was Baya at their table.

She handed him a glass when he came over. "Feel better? I ordered you a sedative."

Without sitting down he put the glass to his lips. It did not taste like any sedative he could remember, and he thought he had tried them all.

"I don't want it."

"Don't be a fool, Lloyd. Take it." Her eyes were cold now, and he was suddenly quite sure why he had been brought here.

Durham said softly, "Good night, tramp. Good night and good-bye." He ran around the table and made a rush for the entrance.

Varnik stepped from the tall desk to bar his way, holding out a piece of paper. "Sir," he said. "Your check."

Durham heard three chairs scrape behind him. He did not pause. He bent and drove the point of his shoulder as hard as he could at a spot just above Varnik's wide

belt. Varnik let go a gasping sigh and wheeled away. Durham went out the door.

The underground street was brightly lighted. It ran straight to right and left, under a low roof, and disappeared on either hand around a right angle turn. Durham went to the left for no particular reason. There were people on the street. He dodged among them, running. They stopped and stared at him, and there was an echo of other feet behind him, also running. He sped around the corner, and it occurred to him that he was completely lost, that he did not even know what part of the city lay above him, or how far. There were different levels to this under-city, following down the foundations, the conduits and tubes and sewers and pumping stations. For the first time he began to feel genuinely trapped, and genuinely afraid.

The street ran straight ahead until it ended against a buttressed foundation wall. There were doors and windows on either side of it. People lived here. There were joints, some fancy-exotic for the carriage trade, others just joints. A couple of smaller streets opened off it, darker and more winding. Durham plunged into one, pausing briefly to look back. Fleeting like deer around the corner were the young pale green couple who had sat at the other table in Varnik's. There was something about the purposeful way they ran that sent a quiver of pure terror through Durham's insides.

He ran again, as hard as he could, wondering who the devil they were and what they wanted with him.

What did anyone want with him, and the small bit of a secret that he carried?

THE narrow street wound and twined. Clearly echoing along the vault of the roof he could hear footsteps. One. Two. Coming fast. He saw an opening no wider than a crack in the wall. He turned into it. It was quite dark in there and he knew he could not go much farther, and that fact added to his burden of shame. There had been a time when this much of a sprint would hardly have breathed him. He tottered on, looking for a place to hide in, and there wasn't any, and his heart banged and floundered against his ribs, and

the muscles of his thighs were like wet strings.

There was a square opening with blank walls all around it and a great big manhole cover in the middle. There was the way he had come in, and there was another narrow way he might have come out, but Varnik was coming through it, running a little crooked and breathing hard. He stopped when he saw Durham. Baya, panting up behind, almost ran into him. Varnik grunted and sprang.

With feeble fierceness, Durham resisted. It got him nowhere. The plum colored man struck him several times out of pure pique, cursing Durham for making trouble, for bruising his gut, for making him run like this. Baya stood by and watched.

"Will you behave now?" Varnik demanded. He whacked Durham again, and Durham glared at him out of dazed eyes and felt the world tilt and slide away from him.

Suddenly there were new voices, footsteps, confusion. He fell, what seemed a long way but was really only to his hands and knees.

The young couple had come into the square space. They were small lithe people, muscled like ocelots, and their skin color was a pale green, very pretty, and characteristic of several different races, but no good for identification here. The girl's tunic had slipped aside over the breast, and the skin there was a clear gold, like new country butter. They both had guns in their strong little fists, and they were speaking over Durham to Varnik and Baya.

"We will question this man alone."

"Oh, no," said Varnik angrily. "You don't get away with that." Baya bent over Durham. "Come on, lover," she said. "Get up." Her voice was cooing. To the strangers she said, "That wasn't our deal at all."

"You failed," said the girl with the two-colored skin, and she fired a beam with frightening accuracy, exactly between them. A piece of the wall behind them fused and flared. Varnik's eyes came wide open.

"Well," he said. "Well, if that's the way you feel about it."

He turned. Baya hesitated, and the muzzle of the gun began to move her way. She

snarled something in her own language and decided to go after Varnik.

Durham got his hands and feet bunched under him. He didn't know what he was going to do, but he knew that once he was left alone with the two small fleet strangers he would eventually talk, and after that it would not matter much what happened to him.

He said to them, hopefully, "You have the wrong man. I don't know—"

There were the five of them in the small space. There were the two couples facing each other, and Durham on his knees between them. And then there was something else.

There was a spiky shadow, perfectly black, of undetermined size and nameless shape, except that it was spiky.

Baya did not quite scream. She pressed against Varnik, and they both recoiled into the alley mouth. The young couple paled under their greenness, and they, too, drew back. Durham crouched on the ground.

The shadow bounded and rolled and leaped through the air and hung cloudlike over Durham's head. Suddenly it shrieked out, in a high, toneless voice like that of a deaf child, a clatter of gibberish in which one syllable stood clear, repeated several times.

"Jubb!" said the shadow. "Jubb! Jubb! Jubb!"

III

JUBB.

It might have been a name, a curse, or a battle cry. Whatever it was, the young couple did not like it. Their faces twisted into slim masks of hate. They raised their guns at the shadow, and the shadow laughed. Abruptly it bunched up small and shot at them.

Durham heard them yell, in pain or fright or both, and he heard their running feet, but he did not see what happened to them. He was going away himself, down the narrow alley that Varnik and Baya were no longer interested in blocking. When he reached the end of the alley he came out onto a well lighted street with lots of people on it, but he still did not feel safe.

Varnik and Baya were not far away. Baya

was leaning against a wall, with her mouth wide open. She was not used to running. Varnik was standing beside her looking sulky. He scowled at Durham when he came out of the alley. Durham stopped, bracing himself and ready to yell for help. But Varnik shook his head. "Nyuh!" he said.

Baya panted. "What's the matter, you afraid?"

"Yes," said Varnik. "Those two little green ones, they are not playing for fun. And that black one—" He quivered all over. "I'm afraid. I see you again, Baya."

He went away. Baya was close onto tears, partly from her own fright, partly from sheer fury and frustration. But she did not cry. She turned and looked at Durham.

"What got into you?" she said. "It was all set, and then you had to louse it up." She cursed him. "It's just like you, Lloyd, to cost me a nice chunk of money."

"Who are those people, Baya?"

"They didn't tell me. I didn't ask."

"Total strangers, eh?"

"Turned up this afternoon at my apartment. I should think you could tell. They're not the type *I* run with."

"No." He frowned, still breathing hard and wiping sweat from his face. "How did they know about us?"

She shrugged, and said maliciously, "Somebody must have told them. Well, so long, Lloyd. I wish you all the luck you can get."

She walked off slowly, patting her hair into place, straightening the line of her white dress. She did not look back. Durham watched her for a second. Then he began to walk as fast as he could in the opposite direction, keeping in the brightest lights. After a bit he found a stairwalk. He rode up on it through two levels, and all the while the roots of his hair were prickling and he was darting nervous glances over his shoulder and into the air over his head.

Jubb! Jubb! Jubb!

He told Varnik who could go away and forget the whole thing.

It was still night when he reached the surface. The shadow did not seem to have followed him, but how could you tell? Even a city as brilliantly lighted as The Hub always has a few corners by night. He kept

listening for that high, flat, hooting voice. It did not speak to him, and he hailed a skycab, appalled by how little time he had left to catch the pre-dawn ferry.

He made it with no minutes to spare. He found a place on the dark side and settled himself for the four-hour run, and then everything caught up to him at once and he began to shake. He sat there in the grip of a violent reaction, living over again Hawtree's instructions and the evening with Baya and the nightmare run through the underground streets, and the coming of the shadow. *The dark birds will soon fly.* Was that enough for people to kill for? It might be if they had an interest in those ships, but the young couple did not look the type. And the shadow?

He shivered and looked out the port. The long thin shadow of the ship extended itself indefinitely into space, but all around it there was light, and the curve of the planet below was a blaze of gold. Down there was Hawtree and a big part of his life. Above and ahead was the huge cool face of the moon, and that was the future, all unexplored. Durham clenched his cold hands together between his knees and thought, I've got to do this, stay sober and do it, a little for Hawtree but mostly for myself. A man can't look at himself twice the way I did tonight. Once is all he can stand. And once ought to be enough.

The brightness blurred and swam. Presently he slept, and his dreams were thronged with shadows hooting, "Jubb! Jubb! Jubb!"

Four hours later Durham walked across the vast main rotunda of the lunar spaceport, dropping his little bundle of passport and ticket as casually as he could. He continued on to the newsstand and made a pretense of looking over the half credit microbooks, waiting.

While he waited he wondered. He wondered how the young couple had known about Baya. He wondered what the shadow was and where it came from, and why it had defended him from the young couple, and what was the meaning of the rather ridiculous word "Jubb." He wondered if he wasn't crazy not to pick up his ticket to Earth and use it.

He wanted a drink very badly.

A uniformed attendant came and said, "I think you dropped this, sir."

He held out a passport with a ticket folded in it. Durham examined them, put them in his pocket, and tipped the attendant, who went away. Durham bought three microbooks and moved on. He could not see anybody watching him, and he told himself it was only nerves that made the skin creep on his back as though eyes were boring into it.

The switch had been made all right on his papers. His name was now John Mills Watson and he had a passage to Nanta Dik aboard the freighter *Magnetta K*. He still wanted a drink. He was determined that he would not go and get it, and he headed grimly for a stairwalk that led down to the port cab system. He had almost stepped onto it, and then from the loudspeakers all over the huge rotunda a voice boomed out, saying,

"Mr. Lloyd Durham, please come to the Information Desk."

Durham flinched as though somebody had struck him. He thought, Hawtree's sent word to recall me. Perhaps it was a trap.

HE APPROACHED the desk cautiously, while his name continued to blare forth from the loudspeakers. Somebody was standing there. A woman, with her back to him. He had not seen that back for over a year, not since the night of the accident, but he had not forgotten it.

"Hello, Susan," he said.

She turned around, and he added bitterly, "He needn't have sent *you*." He was convinced now that she had come to call him back.

She seemed surprised. "Who?"

"Your father."

"Dad? Good heavens, Lloyd, you don't suppose he knows I'm here!" She was tall, as he remembered her, and handsome, and beautifully dressed, and very self-assured. She smiled, one of those brittle things with no humor in it, and then she asked, "How long have you before take-off?"

Durham said slowly, "Time enough."

"We can't talk here."

"No. Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

They walked in silence to the crowded,

noisy spaceport bar. They found a place and sat down. Durham ordered. Susan Hawtree sat opening and closing her handbag as though the operation was of the most absorbing interest.

He asked, "Why did you come here?"

"It seemed as though somebody ought to say good-bye."

"Who told you I was leaving?"

"I have a friend in the travel office. She tells me if anybody I know books passage home."

"Convenient."

"Yes."

The drinks came. There was a clatter of voices, speaking in a thousand tongues, laughing, crying, saying hello and good-bye and till we meet again. Susan turned her glass round and round in her fingers, and Durham watched her.

"I'm sorry, Lloyd. Sorry everything could not have turned out better."

"Yes. So am I."

"I hope you'll have better luck at home."

"Thanks."

Another silence in which Durham tried hard to figure her angle.

He said, "I heard you tried to talk your father into giving me another chance. Thanks for that."

She stared at him blankly and shook her head. "You know how Dad feels about you. I've never dared mention your name."

A cold feeling settled in the pit of Durham's stomach. *There's somebody else, Lloyd, who wanted you to have another chance. Fatherly intuition?*

Or a big fat lie?

Let's face it, Durham, why would Hawtree send you on a mission to the dog pound? There are ten billion people on The Hub. He could have found somebody else.

The whole business smells. It reeks.

But wait. Suppose he sent Susan here to test me; to see if I'd talk? Not too believable, but a pleasanter belief than the alternative. Let's see.

"Susan. Look, I can say this now because I'm going home and that's the end of it. We won't see each other any more. I should never have got engaged to Willa, I didn't love her. It was you all the time."

He caught the quick glint of tears in



her eyes and was appalled. Tears for him? From Susan Hawtree?

"That's why I went with you that night," she whispered. "I thought I could take you from her. I thought I could make you be what you ought to be—oh, damn you, Lloyd, I should never have come here!"

She jumped up and walked rapidly away from the table. He followed her, with his eyes and his mouth both wide open and something very strange happening inside him.

One thing sure. She was no plant. Susan."

"Don't you have to get aboard for something?"

Yes, but—Susan, rode down with me. I want to talk to you."

"There's nothing to talk about."

But she went to the stairwalk with him, and rode down, her face turned away and her head held so high she seemed to tower over him.

"Susan," he said. "Do you think—could you give me—"

No, that's not the gambit. But what do you say—Susan, I'm a changed man. Susan, wait for me?

The stairwalk slid them gently off onto a very long platform. There was a crowd on it, sorting itself into the endless lines of purple monorail taxis that moved along both sides.

"Susan."

"Good bye, Lloyd."

"No, wait a minute. Please. I don't know quite how—"

Suddenly they were not alone. A young couple had joined them. The color of their skin had changed from pale green to a warm burnt orange, and their clothing was different, but Durham recognized them without difficulty. A hard object prodded him in the side, and the young man, smiling, said to him, "Get into that cab." The young woman, also smiling, said to Susan

Hawtree, "Don't scream. Keep perfectly quiet."

Susan's face went white. She looked at Durham, and Durham said to the young man, "Let her go, she has nothing to do with this!"

"Get in the cab," said the young man. "Both of you."

"I think," said Susan, "we'd better do it."

They got in. The doors closed automatically behind them. The young man, with his free hand, took out a ticket and laid it in the scanner slot, with the code number of the ship's docking area uppermost. The taxi clicked, hummed, and took off smoothly.

Durham saw the ticket as the young man removed it from the scanner. It was a passage to Nanta Dik aboard the freighter *Enterprise K*.

IV

THE MONORAILS came out onto the surface in bunches like very massive cables and then began to branch out, the separate "wires" of the cables eventually spreading into a network that covered the entire moon. The taxi picked up speed, clicking over points as it swerved and swung, feeling its way onto the one clear track that led where its scanner had told it to go. Durham was aware obliquely of other monorail taxis in uncountable numbers going like the devil in all directions, and of other types of machines moving below on the surface, and of mobile cranes that walked like buildings, and of an horizon filled with the upthrust noses of great ships like the towers of some fantastic city. Beside him Susan Hawtree sat, rigid and quivering, and before him on the opposite seat were the two young people with the guns.

Durham said, in a voice thick with anger and fright, "Why did you have to drag her into it?"

The man shrugged. "She is perhaps part of the conspiracy. In any case, she would have made an alarm."

"What do you mean, conspiracy? I'm going home to Earth. She came to say good-bye—" Durham leaned forward. "You're

the same two bastards from last night. What do you—"

"Please," said the man, contemptuously. He gestured with the gun. "You will both sit still with your hands behind your heads. So, Wanbecq-ai will search you. If either one should attempt to interfere, the other will suffer for it."

The wiry young woman did her work swiftly and efficiently. "No weapons," she said. "Hai! Wanbecq, look here!" She began to gabble in a strange tongue, pointing to Durham's passport and ticket, and then to Susan's ID card. Wanbecq's narrow eyes narrowed still further.

"So," he said to Durham. "Your name has changed since yesterday, Mr. Watson. And for one who returns to Sol III, you choose a long way around."

Susan stared hard at Durham. "What's he talking about?"

"Never mind. Listen, you—Wanbecq, is that your name? Miss Hawtree has nothing to do with any of this. Her father—"

"Is a part of the embassy which sent you out," said Wanbecq, flicking Susan's ID card with his finger. "Do not expect me to believe foolishness, Mr. Watson-Durham." He spoke rapidly to Wanbecq-ai. She nodded, and they both turned to Susan.

"Obviously you were sent with instructions for Mr. Durham. Will you tell us now what they were?"

Susan's face was such a blank of amazement that Durham would have laughed if the situation had not been so extremely unfunny.

"Nobody sent me with anything. Nobody even knows I came. Lloyd, are these people crazy? Are you crazy? What's going on here?"

He said, "I'm not sure myself. But I think there are only two possibilities. One, your father is a scoundrel. Two, he's a fool being used by scoundrels. Take your pick. In either case, I'm the goat."

Her white cheeks turned absolutely crimson. She tried twice to say something to Durham. Then she turned and said to the Wanbecqs, "I've had enough of this. Let me out."

They merely glanced at her and went on talking.

"You might as well relax," said Durham

to her, in colloquial English, hoping the Wanbecqs could not understand it. "I'm sorry you got into this, and I'll try to get you out, but don't do anything silly."

She called him a name she had never learned in the Embassy drawing rooms. There was a manual switch recessed in the body of the taxi, high up, and sealed in with a special plastic. It said EMERGENCY on it. Susan took off her shoe and swung.

The plastic shattered. Susan dropped the shoe and grabbed for the switch. Wanbecq yelled. Wanbecq-ai leaped headlong for Susan and bore her back onto the seat. She was using her gun flatwise in her hand, solely as a club. Susan let out one furious wail.

And Durham, moving more by instinct than by conscious thought, grabbed Wanbecq-ai's uplifted arm and pulled her over squalling onto his lap.

Wanbecq started forward from the opposite seat.

"Don't," said Durham. He had Wanbecq-ai's wrist in one hand and her neck in the other, and he was not being gentle. Wanbecq-ai covered him, and the two of them together covered Susan. Wanbecq stood with his knees bent for a spring, his gun flicking back and forth uncertainly. Wanbecq-ai had stopped squalling. Her face was turning dark. Susan huddled where she was, half stunned. Durham shifted his grip on Wanbecq-ai's arm and got the gun into his own hand.

"Now," he said to Wanbecq. "Drop it."

Wanbecq dropped it.

Durham scrabbled it in with his heel until it was between his own feet. Then he heaved Wanbecq-ai forcibly at her husband. It was like heaving a rag doll, and while Wanbecq was dealing with her Durham managed to pick up the other gun.

Susan lifted her head. She looked around with glassy eyes and then, with single-minded persistence, she got up.

Durham said sharply, "Sit down!"

Susan reached for the emergency

Durham smacked her across the stomach with the back of his left hand, not daring to take his eyes off the Wanbecqs. She doubled over it and sat down again. Durham said, "All right now, damn it, all of you—sit still!"

THE taxi sped on its humming rail, further and farther into the reaches of the spaceport. Below there were the wide clear spaces of the landing aprons, and great ships standing in them, their tails down and their noses high in the air, high above the monorail, towering over the freight belts and the multitude of machines that served them.

Ahead there was the onracing edge of twilight, and beyond it, coming swiftly, was the lunar night.

Durham said to Wanbecq, "What's this all about?"

Wanbecq sneered.

"You know," said Durham, "there's a law against changing the color of your skin for the purpose of committing criminal acts. That's so the wrong people won't get blamed. There's a law against carrying lethal weapons. There is even, humorously enough, a law against espionage on The Hub. You know I'm going to turn you over to the authorities?"

Again Wanbecq sneered. He was a hateful little man, but he looked so young and so proudly martyred that Durham almost felt sorry for him.

Almost. Not quite.

"On second thought," he said, "I guess I'll save you both for Jubb."

That was a random shot, prompted by the memory of how their faces looked when the shadow-thing had squealed that word at them. It hit. Wanbecq's face became distorted with a fanatic hatred, and Wanbecq-ai, rubbing her throat, croaked, "Then you *are* in league with The Beast."

She pronounced that name with unmistakable capitals.

"Who said I was?" asked Durham.

"The darkbird came to help you. It told us Jubb had claimed you."

"It did," said Durham softly, "did it?" The dark birds will soon fly. The dark birds merely refer to a couple of ships engaged in poaching. That's what you say, Mr. Hawtree.

"What is a darkbird? You mean that shadow thing?"

"They are the servants, the familiars of The Beast," said Wanbecq. "The instruments by which he hopes to enslave all humanity. Do not pretend, Mr. Durham."

"I'm not. This Jubb—what is he beside The Beast?"

Wanbecq stared at him, and Durham made a menacing gesture. "Come on, I want to know."

"Jubb is the ruler of Senya Dik."

"And Senya Dik?"

"Our sister planet. A dark and evil sister, plotting our destruction. A demon sister, Mr. Durham. Have you ever heard of the Bitter Star?"

"I never heard of any of it but I find it very interesting. Go on."

"Whoever controls the darkbirds controls the Star, and whoever controls the Star can destroy anything he wishes. This is Jubb."

Wanbecq thrust out his hands. "You're human, Mr. Durham. If you have sold your soul, take it back again. Fight with us, not against us."

"I assume," said Durham, "that Jubb is not human."

Wanbecq-ai made an abrupt sound of disgust. "This is silly, Mr. Durham. If you know so little why are you going to Nanta Dik at all?"

Durham did not answer. He did not have any answer to that one. Wondered if ever he would have it.

"If you are so ignorant," continued Wanbecq-ai viciously, "of course you don't know that the Terran consul Karlovic is over his head in intrigue, conniving with Jubb in order to make this treaty of Federation."

Durham sat up straight. "A treaty of what?"

"The sector," said Wanbecq slowly, "will belong either to the human race or to the beast, but it cannot belong to both."

"Federation," said Durham, answering his own question. And suddenly many formless things began to fit together into a shape that was still cloudy but had a sinister solidity. In order for a solar system to become a member of the Federation its member planets were required to have achieved unity among themselves, with common citizenship, a common council, common laws. And in order for a sub-sector to become federated, all its solar systems must have reached a like accord.

In this case, since the system of the two Diks was the only inhabited one in the sub-sector, the two things were the same.

The fate of 9G rested solely on the behavior of two planets.

If 9G remained unfederated, the company or companies engaged in mining or other business under local license could continue to operate in almost any way they chose as long as they kept the local officials happy. They could strip the whole area of its mineral resources, pile up incredible fortunes, and leave the native worlds with nothing. But if 9G became a member of the Federation, Federation law would immediately step in, and Federation enforcement of same, and if there were any abuses of native rights, the people responsible would suffer for it.

Postulate a company. Postulate a connection between it and Hawtree. Postulate and postulate.

At around three hundred miles an hour the taxi plunged into the twilight zone. Light sprang on automatically. Outside it became dark very swiftly, and the darkness roared, and glittered with a million lamps.

"Who," asked Durham, "is principally against your two worlds uniting so that the treaty can go through?"

"All of us," said Wanbecq fiercely. "Shall we give up our rights, our independence, our human institutions, everything our race has stood for—"

Wanbecq-ai cried out, "We will never unite, never! No one can force us to betray our species!"

Susan began to cry.

"Please," said Durham. "Baby. You're all right."

"You hit me."

"I had to. I'll apologize later. Be quiet now, Susan, please." He turned back to the Wanbecqs. "Everybody on Nanta Dik feels that way?"

"There are traitors everywhere," said Wanbecq darkly. "Some of them, unfortunately, are in positions of power."

"They won't be for long," said Wanbecq-ai. "Look here, Mr. Durham, you're going to Nanta Dik with a message. We aren't the only ones who want to know what it is. Jubb has sent a darkbird for you. Take my advice. Tell us your message and go back to The Hub."

Susan said in a nasty muffled voice, "You're insane. Nobody would trust him

with a message to the milkman. He lost his job because he couldn't be trusted."

Without rancor, Durham said, "You're absolutely right, darling. And wouldn't it be strangely fitting if that's why I got my job back again?" He said to the Wanbecqs, "Somebody tipped you off about me. Who?"

"We know him only as a friend of *the Bitter Star*."

"Somebody must have sent you here from *Nanta Dik*."

"On our world there are many friends of humanity. Think of them, Mr. Durham, when you kiss the Bitter Star."

THE taxi slowed, strongly, smoothly. The blurred panorama of lights and ships became separable into individual shapes. Durham stared out ahead. There was the squat form of a freighter, ugly and immensely powerful, on a landing apron only partially lighted. The *Margaretta K.*

Durham asked, "Who owns her?"

"Universal Minerals."

"And who owns Universal Minerals?"

"Several people, I think, all Earthmen."

"Who speaks for Universal Minerals on Nanta Dik?"

A little reluctantly, Wanbecq said "There is a man named Morrison."

The name rang no bell in Durham's mind. It brought no visible reaction to Susan's face either, though he was watching it closely.

"And how," he asked, "does Morrison feel about humanity?"

"Ask the Bitter Star," said Wanbecq, and the taxi slid to a halt beside the platform on which Durham now saw that several men were standing. Wanbecq and Wanbecq-ai hunched forward expectantly.

"No," said Durham. "I'm getting out, but you're not." He nudged Susan. "Get ready."

The doors slid open automatically. Susan scrambled out. Durham went right behind her, twisted like a cat in the opening, and splashed a brief warning blast off the floor at the feet of the Wanbecqs, who had raised a frantic cry and were trying to follow.

Susan said breathlessly, "Oh!"

The men who had been standing on the platform were now rushing forward. Three were lean and butter-colored. One was a

burly Earthman, who said in a tone of amazement, "What the hell—"

"Hold it!" Durham shouted. He swept Susan behind him and tried to cover all fronts at once, not knowing whether the men were there to capture him or were only there by chance and responding to the Wanbecqs' cry for help. "These people attacked us. I have passage on your ship—"

From out of the night there came a shrill, flat, hooting cry of "Jubb! Jubb! Jubb!"

The butter-colored men yelled. They scattered away and out, their feet scrabbling on the platform. The Earthman was slower and more belligerent. He turned around and the spiky little blob of darkness came leaping at him. He put up his hands and struck at it, and the darkbird hooted as the fists passed through it, crackling. The Earthman opened his mouth in a round shocked O and went rigid, rising up on the tips of his toes. The darkbird seemed to merge with his skull for the fraction of a second, and he crumpled down with his mouth still open and his chest rising and falling heavily. The darkbird swooped toward Durham.

Durham fired at it.

It soaked up part of the beam and left the rest, like a well-fed cat rejecting an overplus of milk. It darted past Durham and into the taxi, where it bounced agilely, once and twice. Wanbecq and Wanbecq-ai fell down on the floor. The doors closed softly and the taxi mechanism whirled and the rail hummed as it took off, heading back to the main terminal. The darkbird returned to Durham.

Susan said in a strange voice, "What is that?"

"Never mind now. Come on."

He started to drag her toward the ramp that led down from the platform. She fought him. She was getting hysterical, and he didn't blame her. The darkbird followed along behind. When they reached the level, Susan planted her feet mulishly and refused to go any farther.

"I don't dare leave you alone out here," he said desperately. "Come along to the ship and the captain will see that you get home safely."

The darkbird circled and dived at Susan. She bolted. It dived at Durham. He bolted

too, off to the right, to the edge of the apron, where he caught up with Susan again. They ran between the storage sheds, onto a spur of the freight-belt system. It was still now, not carrying any freight. They tried to run across it to the other side, but the darkbird drove them back. It was immediately apparent, of course, that the thing was herding them. He shouted at it to let Susan alone, but it did not pay any attention to him. And he thought, it wants us to go somewhere, so it won't knock us out. Maybe? It's worth a try.

He took Susan and jumped off the belt and ran.

The darkbird touched him, ever so gently. He tried to yell, gave up, and tottered back where it wanted him to go, with every nerve in him pulled taut and twangling in a horrible half-pleasurable fashion that made his legs and arms move unnaturally, as though he were dancing. The darkbird followed, once again placid and unconcerned.

They went along the belt for some distance. It was limber, sagging a bit between the giant rollers, and it boomed under their feet with a sharp slapping sound. Susan stumbled so often he picked her up and carried her. There was nobody to call to, nobody to ask for help. The towering ships were far away.

The darkbird nudged him again at last, out across a landing apron where a very strange looking ship stood in the solitary majesty of impending take-off. The flood lights were blinking at twenty-second intervals, visual warning to stand clear, and Durham ran staggering as through a stroboscopic nightmare, with the white-faced girl in his arms.

Dark, light. Black, bright. A haze of exhaustion swam before his eyes. Things moved in it, jerky shapes in an old film, in an antique penny peep show. Day, night. Dark, bright. The things moved closer, unhuman things clad in fantastic pressure suits. Durham screamed.

He tried to run again, and the darkbird touched him. Once more there was the unbearable twitching of the nerves and he danced in the black, bright, day, night. He danced into a large box that was waiting for him, and he kept going until he struck

the end wall of hard metal. He turned then, and saw the very thick door go sighing shut and the dogs go slipping into place snick-snick one after the other, and it was too late even to try to get out again.

He set Susan down as gently as he could and sank down beside her. The floor moved up under him sharply. There was a banging and clattering of tackle overhead, and then a sickening sidewise lurch. The on-off pattern of the light changed outside the two round windows that were in the box. It became a steady green, in which his hands showed like two sickly-white butterflies on his knees. There were more noises, hollow and far away, and then a second lurch, a lift, a drop, and after that a larger motion encompassing the box and the entire locus in which it stood.

Durham put his face in his hands and gave up.

V

SUSAN was screaming. Let me out, let me out. She was pounding on something. Durham started up. He must have slept or passed out. The box was perfectly still now. There was no sense of motion. But he could tell by the change in gravity that the ship was in space.

Susan was by one of the windows. She was pounding on it with her favorite implement, the heel of her shoe. Durham went to her and glanced out. Cold sweat broke out on him, and he grabbed her hand.

"Stop it! Are you crazy?" He wrenched the shoe from her and threw it across the small space of the box. Then he felt of the glass, peering at it, frantic lest she should have cracked it.

"I'm going to get out," said Susan grimly, and groped around for something heavier.

"Look." He shook her and turned her face to the window. "Do you see that air out there?"

The box now stood in a large empty hold. He could see the curve of the ship's hull, ribbed with tremendous struts of steel, and a deck of metal plates, glistening in the green light. *Green* light? Earth ships have a yellow-white type light, the kind

that the sun gives off. Well, yes—but suppose that the sun was green?

Nanta Dik circles a green star.

So does Senya Dik. Those creatures outside the ship were anything but humanoid. Jubb's darkbird herded us in here. Easy. Now we know.

"What about the air?" asked Susan. "Let go of me."

"It's poisonous. Can't you tell by looking at it?" It rolled and roiled and sluggishly shifted in vapors of thick chartreuse and vivid green. "And don't you remember, they were wearing pressure suits? They couldn't live in our atmosphere. We surely couldn't live in theirs."

There was no answer.

"Susan, Susan?"

"I want to go home," she said, and began to cry.

"There now, Susie. Take it—"

"Don't call me Susie!"

"All right, but take it easy. I'll find out what the situation is and then I'll—"

"You'll what? You'll make a mess of things just like you always have. You'll get me into more trouble, just like you got me into this. You're no good, Lloyd, and I wish I'd never seen you. I wish I'd never come to say good-bye!" She rushed to the window and began to pound on it again, this time with her fists.

Durham hauled her away and shook her until her jaw rattled together. "I'm sorry you came too," he said savagely. "You're the last person in the galaxy I'd pick to be in trouble with. A damned spoiled female with no honesty, no courage, no nothing but your father's position to trade on." He wrapped his arms tight around her. "Hell, this is no time to be quarrelling. Let's both keep our mouths shut. Come on, honey, we're not dead yet."

She choked a little, and stood trembling against him. Then she said,

"I think I fell over a chair a while ago. Maybe there's a lamp. Let's look."

The green light was dim, but their eyes were used to it. They found a lamp and turned it on. The box was flooded with a clear white glare, very grateful to Earthly senses. Durham looked around and said slowly, "I'll be damned."

The box was about the size of a small

room. It had in it an armchair, a bunk, compact cupboards and lockers, a sink and hotplate, and a curtained-off corner with a sanitary device. Durham turned on one of the sink taps. Water came out. He turned it off and went and sat down in the armchair.

"I'm damned," he said again.

"Freezer," said Susan, looking into things. "Food concentrates. Pots and pans. Blanket. Change of clothes—all men's. Booze, two bottles of it. Rack of micro-books. Somebody went to a lot of trouble."

"Yes."

"Pretty comfortable. Everything you need, all self-contained."

"Uh."

"But Lloyd—it's only for one."

He said dismally, "We'll take turns on the bunk." But it wasn't the bunk that worried him. He went and looked out of the other window. By craning his head he could see an assembly of storage tanks, pressure tanks, pumps, purifiers, blower units, all tightly sealed against any admixture of Senyan air. That, too, was only for one. A most ghastly claustrophobia came over Durham, and for a moment he saw Susan, not as a spoiled and pretty girl, but as his rival for the oxygen that was life.

Susan said, "Lloyd. Something is coming in."

For an instant he thought she meant into the box, and then he realized that the reverberating clang he heard must be the hatch door of the hold. He joined her at the opposite window.

There were two—no, three dark shapes coming toward the box, moving swiftly through the green and chartreuse vapors. They undulated on two pairs of stubby legs set fore and aft under a flexible lower body. Their upper bodies, carried erect, were rather bulbous and tall, with well-defined heads and two sets of specialized arms, the lower ones thick and powerful for heavy work, the upper ones as delicate as an engraver's fine tools. Their skin was a glossy black, almost like patent leather. They wore neat harnesses of what looked like metal webbing in the way of dress, and on the breast strap each one carried an insigne.

"Ship's officers," Durham guessed. "Probably one of them's the captain."

"They're horrible," said Susan. She backed away from the window until the end of the bunk caught her behind the knees and she sat down.

Durham laughed. "Fine pair of cosmopolites we are. We're used to the idea of non-humanoids. There are a lot of them on The Hub, but they're mostly segregated by necessity, so we practically never really see any. But now we're the ones who have to be segregated. And the reality is quite another thing from the idea, isn't it?"

HE BACKED away himself, a step or two, until shame made him stop. The three non-humanoids came and looked with large iridescent eyes, through the window. Their oddly shaped mouths moved rapidly, so he knew that they were talking, and their slender upper arms were as mobile and expressive as the hands of so many girls at a sorority tea. Then one of them turned and did something to the wall of the box, and suddenly Durham could hear them clearly. There was a speaker device beside the window. Durham sprang at it.

"Can you hear me? Can you hear me out there? Listen, you have no right to do this, you've got to take us back! Miss Hawtree is the daughter of—"

"Mr. Durham." The voice was unhuman but strong, and the esperanto it spoke was perfectly understandable. "Please calm yourself and listen to what I have to say. I appreciate your feelings—"

"Hia!"

"—but there is nothing I can do about it. I have my orders, and I can assure you—"

"From Jubb?"

"You'll be fully informed when you reach Senya Dik. Meanwhile, I can assure you that no harm will come to you, now or later. So please put your fears at rest. A little patience—"

Susan had leaped up. Now she flung herself upon the speaker mike. "What about me?"

"Your presence was unexpected, and I fear it's going to be rather difficult for you both. But you must make the best of it. In regard to air and water, I must caution you that the supply will hardly be adequate for you both unless you are extremely careful."

This had not occurred to Susan before. "You mean—"

"I mean that you must use no more water than is absolutely necessary for drinking and preparing your food. The food you must share between you, on half rations. As for the air—"

"Yes," said Durham. "What about the air?"

"I believe that activity has the effect of increasing your metabolism, thereby consuming more oxygen. So I would advise you both to move and speak as little as possible. Remain calm. Remain quiet. In that way you should be able to survive. It is not that we are grudging. It is simply that we cannot share any of our supplies with you, because you are alien life forms and totally incompatible. If we had known there would be two, we would have prepared. As it is, you must work together to conserve."

"But," said Susan, "but this isn't fair, it isn't right! You'll take me back or my father will see to it—"

"Keep this speaker open," said the Senyan, "so that you will be sure to hear the audio signal, a sustained note repeated at intervals of forty seconds. Prepare to enter overdrive."

He did not say good-bye. He merely went away with his two officers. Susan screamed after them. Durham clapped his hand over her mouth, and took her forcibly and put her on the bunk.

"Lie there," he said. "Quiet. Didn't you hear him? Don't move, don't talk."

He sat down in the chair, consciously trying not to breathe deeply.

But—

"Shut up."

"Don't you say shut up to me, Lloyd. This is all your fault."

"My fault? Mine? Because you had to shove yourself in—"

"Shove myself? Father was right about you. And it is your fault. If you hadn't asked me to ride down with you—"

"Oh, shut up, damn it, that's just like a woman! If you knew your next breath was your last one you'd still have to use it for talk. You want to asphyxiate us both with your gabbling?"

She was quiet for a long while. Then he realized that she was crying.

"Lloyd, I'm scared."

"So am I." He began to laugh. "When I come to think of it, it was your father that got us both into this. I hope he sweats blood in great gory streams."

"You're a drunken ungrateful swine! If dad really did give you another chance—"

"Ah ah! Remember the oxygen! He did. And I was such a fatheaded idiot I thought it was on the level. I even reformed." He laughed again, briefly. "Overcome with gratitude, I did exactly what I was supposed not to do. I sobered up and held my tongue."

"I don't understand at all."

"I was supposed to talk, Susan. I was given a message, and I was supposed to babble it all over The Hub. I don't know exactly what that message was intended to trigger off when it got into circulation. Probably a war. But I'll bet I know what I triggered off by not talking. Trouble for your old man."

"I don't believe a word of it."

Durham shrugged. It was very little effort to reach out and lift a bottle from a nearby cupboard. He opened it and took a long pull. Then he looked at the bottle, shook his head, and passed it to Susan.

She made a derisive noise, and he shrugged again.

"That's right. Funny thing. First I was stricken with remorse and determined to be worthy. Now I'm just mad. Before I get through, I'm going to hang your father higher than Haman."

The audio signal, shrill and insistent and sounding somehow as unhuman as the voices of the Senyans, came piercingly through the speaker.

Susan gasped. "Wherever they're taking us—they're not going to kill us, are they?"

"I think they want to question us. I think some dirty work is going on, one of those million-credit-swindle things you hear about once in a while, and I think your father is right up to his neck in it. If I'm right, that's the chief reason you were brought along."

"I think you're a dirty low down liar," she said, in a voice he could hardly hear.

The signal continued to squeal. Durham moved to the bunk.

"Slide over."

"No."

But she did not fight him when he pushed himself in beside her and took her in his arms.

"The haughty Miss Hawtree," he said, and smiled. "You're a mess. Hair in your eyes. Make-up all smeared. Tears dripping off the end of your nose."

The light dimmed, became strange and eerie.

"They could have made this damned bunk a little wider."

"It doesn't matter. After a trip like this, I won't have any reputation left, anyway. Nobody would believe me on oath."

The fabric of the ship shifted, strained, slipped, moved. The fabric of Durham's body did likewise. He set his teeth and said,

"Don't worry, dear. I can always ask the captain to marry us."

By the time the audio-signal shrilled again, heralding a return to solar system speeds and space, it seemed that ages had passed.

THEY did not talk about marriage now, even in jest. They hated each other. "Cabin fever," they had said politely for a while, making excuses. But they did not bother with excuses any more. They just had simply and quietly loathed each other, as the long, timeless time went by.

Pity, too, thought Durham, looking at Susan where she lay in the bunk. She's really a handsome wench, even without all the makeup and the hairdo and those incredible undergarments that women use, as though they were semi-liquescient. Just lying there in her slip now, she looks younger, gentler, nice and soft, as though she'd be pleasant to hold in your arms again if you had the strength and the oxygen and if you didn't hate her so.

"Lloyd?"

"Huh?"

"How long before we land?"

"How should I know?"

"Well, you could find out."

"You find out. You can yell as loud as I can. Louder."

"I'll yell," said Susan ominously. "The second I get out of here, I'll yell so loud the whole galaxy will hear me."

"I should think they've already heard you clear out to Andromeda."

The lights dimmed. The peculiar noises and wrenchings that went with coming out of overdrive began. Durham braced himself.

"It's too bad you reformed," said Susan. "You used to be amusing company, at least. Now you're sour and bad tempered. You're also—"

What he was also Durham never heard. There was a crashing, roaring, rending impact. The chair went out from under him so that he fell face up into the ceiling. The lights went out entirely. He heard a thin faint sound that might have been Susan screaming. Then the ceiling slid away from him and spilled him down a wall. As he went scrabbling past the window he looked out and saw that there were now long vertical rents in the outer hull through which the stars were shining.

The pumps had stopped.

A long settling groan and then silence. The artigrav field was dead. Durham floated, along with everything else that was not bolted down.

"Susan," he said. "Susan?"

"Here."

They met and clung together in mid air while the hull began a slow axial rotation around them.

"What happened?"

"We hit something."

"The Senyans—"

"They must all be done for. The hull is split open. Head-on ram, I think, just as we came out of overdrive. They wouldn't have had time to get space armor."

"Then are we—"

"Hush. Don't talk. Just wait and see."

They clung together, silent. The hull turned without sound, and the stars shone in through the long slits, into the empty vacuum of the hold.

"Lloyd, I can't breathe."

"Yes you can. We still have as much air as ever. It just isn't circulating now."

"I don't know if I can stand this, Lloyd. It's such an awful way."

"There isn't any way that's good. It won't be so bad, really. You'll just go off to sleep."

"Hold onto me?"

"Sure."

"Lloyd."

"What?"

"I'm sorry."

"So am I."

The hull turned and the stars glittered. The vitiated air grew foul, grew thick and leaden. The man and woman floated in the closed space, their arms tight around each other, their faces close together.

Something jarred against the hull.

"Lloyd! I see a light!"

"It's only a star."

"No. Look through the window. Moving—"

Men, humans, wearing pressure suits, had come into the hull. Two of them were dragging oxygen bottles. They came up to the box and flashed their lights in through the windows. They knocked and made reassuring signs. After a minute or two fresh oxygen hissed in under pressure through the air duct. Susan laughed a little and then fainted. Durham still held her in his arms. Everything got pleasantly dark and far away, lost in the single simple joy of breathing.

There were sounds and motions but he did not pay much attention to them, and he was mildly surprised when he happened to float past a window and noticed that now there was only space outside, very large and full of hot and splendid lights. When he passed the other window he saw part of a ship, and he understood that the box was being hoisted across the interval between it and the wreck. It seemed a remarkably kind dispensation of fortune to have provided a ship at exactly the right time and place, and not just any ship but one equipped with the specialized tackle required for moving heavy loads in space.

A mighty cargo hatch swallowed the box. Susan came to, and they waited, weakly hysterical, Durham not even noticing that a spiky shadow had slipped in with the box. Suddenly again there was man-made light, and then the sound of heavy air pumps reached them. The pumps stopped, and, quite simply, men came in and opened the door of the box.

There was a considerable noise and confusion, everybody talking at once. Durham lost track of Susan. He was only partly conscious of what he was doing, but he felt

that everybody was in a hurry to get something done. Then there was a cabin with a port in it, and beyond the port there was space, and in that space a great light flared blindingly and was gone.

VI

MORRISON said, "Murder is a harsh word, Durham. After all, they weren't human."

"There's no such difference under Federation law."

"We're not under Federation law here."

"No. And you're engaged in a life-or-death struggle to make sure you don't come under it. This happened to be one of the dumbest moves."

Morrison looked at him in mild surprise. "You figured that out, Durham?" He was a lean gray, kindly looking man, the conventional father type. Susan was staring at him in blank horror, as though she could not believe what she was hearing. "I wasn't told you were that bright. Well, you're right. Universal Minerals and its various dummy corporations in this sub-sector are making such profits as you wouldn't believe if I told you, and we have no intention of giving it up."

"Even if you have to slaughter a whole ship's crew. What did you do, tow an asteroid into position?"

Morrison shrugged. "Special debris is not common."

"You could have killed us, too, you know," Durham said angrily. "You could have killed her. Hawtree wouldn't have liked that."

"It was a risk we had to take. It was a reasonably small one." He looked Durham up and down. "You made us one whale of a mess of trouble. If my yacht wasn't a good bit faster than Jubb's ship, we'd have been whipped. What happened to you? Why didn't you talk like you were supposed to?"

"You'd die laughing."

"I can control my emotions. Go ahead."

Durham told him, "Virtue," he finished sourly, "is sure enough its own reward. I should have stayed drunk. I was happier that way. What happened to the Wanlexes?"

Morrison was still laughing. "They had not come to when their taxi reached the terminus. The port police picked them up." He took a bottle out of a locker and pushed it and a glass across the cabin table to Durham. "Here. You've earned it. Wait till I tell Hawtree. And he was so sure of you. Just goes to show you can't trust anybody."

Susan said, "But *why*?" Shock was making her mind move slowly. It was a minute before they realized she was referring to the Senya Dik.

She added, very slowly, "It's true about my father?"

"I'm afraid it is," said Morrison. "But I wouldn't worry about it too much. He's a very rich man. He's also a shrewd one, and it looks now as though he's going to be all right. Give her a drink, Durham, she needs it. Would you like to lie down, Miss Hawtree? All right, then, I'll tell you why."

He leaned over her with no look of kindness at all. "Get this all clearly in mind, Miss Hawtree, so you'll understand that if at any time you try to hang me, you'll hang your father too. We're partners, equally guilty. You understand that."

"Yes." She looked so white that Durham was frightened. But she sat quietly and listened.

"For years now," Morrison said, "I have managed the company here, and Hawtree has used his position with the Embassy to see that I have a free hand. He sees that no complaints get to ears higher up. He sees that any annoying red tape is taken care of. Most important of all, he sees that any official communication from either of the Diks that might be unfavorable to us is permanently lost in the files—including all requests for aid in achieving Federation status. Our connection, naturally, is one of the best kept secrets in the galaxy."

"We had very easy sailing until Jubb rose to power on Senya Dik. Jubb is an able leader. He knows what's happening to the resources of the sector, and he knows the only way to put a stop to it. Unfortunately for us, all the leaders on Nanta Dik aren't fools either, and there is a growing movement toward unification. Jubb has pushed it and pushed it, so that we've been

forced to take more and more vigorous steps. The human supremacy groups, made up of such people as the Wanbecqs, have been very useful. And of course Senya Dik has its lunatic fringe too, in reverse but equally useful. But Jubb started a campaign of petitioning the Embassy. He poured it on so hard that Hawtree knew he wasn't going to be able to pigeonhole all the petitions forever. Furthermore, it was obvious that Jubb knew there must be collusion somewhere and was hammering away to find it. So Hawtree sent for me."

"And," said Durham, "you said, 'Let's start a war between the two planets. Then unification can't possibly take place, and Jubb will have too much on his hands to bother us.' Maybe he'll even be eliminated. And you went looking for a goat."

"Exactly. You were given a message about dark birds that would have significance only to a Nantan. The Wanbecqs were put on your trail. All you had to do was talk."

"What if I had talked too much?"

"How could you? You didn't know anything. And Hawtree's story would be that he had simply given you passage home, which you had bought."

"And anyway," said Durham thoughtfully, "I would have been either dead in an alley somewhere, or aboard a ship going to Nanta Dik—which I would not have reached."

"It was a flexible situation."

Susan said, "Then you admit that you—" She could not finish.

MORRISON turned on her irritably. "You very nearly wrecked us, Miss Hawtree. Durham's disappearance wouldn't have raised a ripple, but the daughter of a highly placed diplomat vanishing was quite another thing. Your father had to think fast and talk faster, or public curiosity would have forced an investigation right then. Fortunately the Wanbecqs helped. They painted a pretty dark picture of Jubb, and Hawtree was able to smooth things over since everybody knew you'd been sweet on Durham and had obviously gone to say good-bye. Hawtree did such a good job, in fact, that he had the whole Hub seething with indignation against Jubb even

before I left. So it turned out well, in spite of you."

"But why did you have to wreck the ship?"

"Well, we had to get you back. We couldn't let Jubb have Mr. Durham to use as a witness against us, and we certainly couldn't let him have Hawtree's daughter to use as a club over Hawtree. Now, you see, the situation is this."

He nodded to the cabin port beyond which the bright flare had come and gone, leaving nothing but emptiness.

"There's nothing left of the ship but atoms, and no one can say what happened to it. Jubb does not have you two, but he can't prove it as long as you're kept out of sight. So we keep you out of sight, and at the same time press demands to Jubb for your return. It looks as though he's hiding you, or has killed you, in fear of the storm he has raised. The more he doesn't give you up the more human opinion turns against him, and the more his own people figure he's made them nothing but trouble. Meanwhile, the Wanbecqs are on their way home with a big story. We can still have our war if we want it. And Jubb's days are numbered."

Durham said slowly, "What if he decides to use the Bitter Star?"

Morrison stared at him, and then laughed. "Don't try to frighten me with my own bogeyman. I took a story a thousand years old and resurrected it and talked it up until it caught. But that's all it is, a story."

"Are you sure? And what about the dark-birds? They seem to get around. Won't they tell Jubb where we are?"

"He'd have a hard time proving it on the word of a shadow. Besides, there are defenses against them. They won't interfere."

"I suppose," said Durham, taking the bottle into his hand as though to pour again, "that it wouldn't bother you to know that one of them is in here now."

Morrison did not take his eyes from Durham's face. "Hawtree made a stinking choice in you. Put down that bottle."

Durham grinned. He raised the bottle higher and chanted, "Jubb, Jubb, Jubb!"

Morrison said between his teeth, "This

would have had to be done anyway." Still watching Durham, he reached one swift hand into the belt of his tunic. Susan made a muffled cry and started to get up. None of the motions were finished. A shadow came out from the darkness of a corner behind Morrison's chair. It flicked against him and he fell across the table, quite still. The darkbird came and hung in the air in front of Durham.

"Jubb," it said.

Durham put down the bottle and wiped the sweat off his forehead. He looked at the darkbird, feeling cold and hollow.

"I want to go to him. You understand? To Jubb."

Up and down it bounced, like the nodding of a head.

Susan said, "What are you going to do?"

"Try and steal a lifeboat."

"I'm going with you."

"No. Morrison doesn't want to kill you, but don't push him too far. You stay. Then if I don't make it you'll still be—" He broke off. "That's taking a lot for granted, isn't it? After all, Hawtree is your father."

She whispered, "I don't care."

"It's the biggest decision you'll ever make. Don't make it too fast." He kissed her. "Besides, if you wait, you may not have to make it at all."

He took Morrison's gun and went out, and the darkbird went with him, bunched small and darting so swiftly that the two men it struck down never saw it. Durham turned aside into the communications room, and the darkbird saw to it that there was no alarm. He damaged radio and radar so that it would take some time to fix them. Then he went on down the corridor to the plainly marked hatch that led to Lifeboat No. 1. He got into it, with the darkbird. As soon as the boat hatch itself was shut, automatic relays blew him free of the pod on a blast of air.

"Jubb," said the darkbird. It touched him, and to his amazement there was no shock, only a chilly tingling that was not unpleasant. Then it simply oozed out through the solid hull, the way smoke oozes through a filter, and was gone.

Durham had no time for any more astonishments. The controls of the lifeboat were designedly very simple and plainly marked,

Durham got himself going and away from Morrison's ship as fast as he could. But he knew that it was not going to be anything like fast enough if the darkbird didn't hurry.

It hurried. And Durham was closer to Senya Dik than he realized. In less than three hours he was in touch with a planetary patrol ship, following it in toward the green blaze of KL421, and a dim cool planet that circled it, farther out than the orbit of Earth around Sol, but not quite so far as Mars.

VII

THE spaceport was in a vast flat plain. Far across the plain Durham could see the dark outline of a city. He stood at the edge of the landing area, between two Senyan officers from the ship. He wore a pressure suit from the lifeboat's equipment, and the wind blew hard, beating and picking and pushing at the suit and the bubble helmet. It was difficult for Durham to stand up, but the Senyans, braced on their four sturdy legs, stood easily and swayed their upper bodies back and forth like trees.

They were big. He had not really understood how big they were until he stood beside them. He gathered that they were waiting for a ground conveyance, and he was not surprised. Light air cabs were hardly suited to their build.

He had talked briefly to Karlovic by radio, and he was impatient to get to the consulate where Karlovic was waiting for him. The minute or two in which they waited for the truck seemed interminable. But it came, a great powerful thing like a moving van, and one of the Senyans said, "Permit me?"

With his two lower arms he lifted Durham onto the platform. The two Senyans spoke to the driver and then got on themselves. The truck took off, going very fast in spite of its size. The Senyans held Durham between them, because there was nothing for a human to hang to, and nowhere to sit down.

They left the spaceport. Huge storage buildings lined the road, and then smaller buildings, and then patches of open country, increasingly dreary to Durham's eyes. High

overhead the sun burned green and small in a sky of cloudy vapor from which fell showers of glinting rain. Poison rain from a poison sky. Durham shivered, and a deep depression settled on him. Nothing hopeful would be done in this place. Not by humans.

The truck roared on. Durham watched the city grow on the murky horizon, rising up into huge ugly towers and blocky structures like old prisons greatly magnified. It was a big city. It was a frightening city. He wished he had never seen it. He wished he was back in The Hub, standing on a high walk with the good hot sun pouring on him and no barriers between him and the good clean air. He wanted to weep with mingled weariness and claustrophobia. Then he noticed that little crowds had collected along the way into the city. They shouted at the truck going by, and waved their arms, and some of them threw stones that rattled off the sides.

"What's the matter?" Durham asked.

"They are members of the anti-human party. Prejudice cuts both ways, a thing our neighbors of Nanta Dik do not seem to understand. Human and non-human are intellectual concepts. On the emotional level it is simply us or not-us. You are not-us, and as such quite distasteful to some. What I do not understand is how they knew you were coming."

"Morrison must have got his radio working. He's been using the extremists here just like the ones on Nanta Dik, to make trouble."

"There are times—" said the Senyan grimly. "But then I make myself remember that there are scoundrels among us, too."

The truck rumbled through the traffic of wide boulevards, between rows of massive buildings that had obviously never been designed with anything so small and frail as human beings in mind. There were Senyans on the streets, apparently going about whatever business they did, and Durham wondered what their home life was like, what games the children played, what they ate and how they thought, what things they worried about in the dark hours of the night. He felt absolutely alien. It was not a nice feeling.

Presently the truck turned into an open circle surrounded by mighty walls of stone.

In one place bright light shone cheerfully from the windows, and the Senyan said, "That is the consulate."

They set him off and showed him where the airlock was. Durham performed the ritual of the lock chamber, frantic to get out of the confining suit. When the inner door swung open he began to tear at the helmet, and a man came in saying, "Let me help."

When Durham was free of the suit, the man looked at him with very tired, very angry eyes. "I'm Karlovic. Jubb's waiting. Come on."

He led Durham down an echoing corridor that dwarfed them by its size. The colors of the polished wood and stone were not keyed to the glaring yellow light, and the rooms that Durham could see into as he passed were not keyed to the small incongruous furnishings that had been forced upon them. Somewhere below there was a throbbing of pumps, and the air smelled of refresher chemicals.

Durham said, "You knew I was being brought here, didn't you?"

Karlovic nodded. "You, yes. The girl, no. She was an overzealous mistake on the part of the darkbird. Yes, I was in on it. I hoped that finally we could get proof, a witness against whoever in the Embassy was working with Morrison. Hawtree, is it? I'm glad to know his name."

He pushed open a door. The room beyond it was only half a room, cut in the middle by a partition of heavy glass. On the other side of the glass wall was the thick green native air, and three Senyans, one of whom came forward when Durham and Karlovic came in. A darkbird hovered close above him. He said to Durham,

"I am Jubb."

There were communicator discs set in the glass. Jubb motioned Durham to a chair beside one. "First let me offer the apology that is due you. You were carrying a message which was not true, which would have made the people of Nanta Dik believe that we were about to come against them with the Bitter Star. The darkbirds warned me, and I felt that I had no choice. I could not let that message be delivered."

Durham said, "No one could blame you for that."

"You understand, I had another motive, too."

"Yes. I don't think you could be blamed for that, either."

JUBB looked at him with his large inscrutable eyes, totally alien, unmistakably intelligent. "I didn't know what you would be like, Mr. Durham, whether you would be in sympathy with your employers or not. Now of course it is evident that you can't be."

Durham said quietly, "I've been to a lot of trouble already to put a rope around their necks. I'm ready to go to a lot more. They've used me like—" He could not think of the right word. Jubb nodded.

"Contempt is not an easy thing to take. I know. Then you will help?"

"In any way I can."

"I want you to go back with me to The Hub, Mr. Durham. Before, I was helpless without proof. Now, as head of a planetary government, I can insist on seeing the ranking Ambassador himself, and I can bypass Hawtree now that I know who he is. I want you to be my witness."

"Nothing," said Durham, "would please me more."

"Good," said Jubb. "Good. Karlovic, it looks as though the end of our long fight may be in sight at last. Take good care of Mr. Durham. He is more precious than gold."

"Meanwhile, Morrison had made us a problem on transportation. We provided that particular ship for the consul's comfort, when there was reason for him to travel in our territory, and we had planned to refit it so that it would accommodate two on the return journey. Now I must ask a ship from our friends on Nanta Dik, and that may take a little time. So rest well, Mr. Durham."

He went out, and Karlovic led Durham back into the hall and from there into a tall gloomy chamber that had a shiny little kitchen lost in one corner of it. There was a table and chairs. Durham sat down and watched Karlovic busy himself with packages of food.

"You don't look very happy about all this," he said.

"I'm not unhappy. I'm worried."

"About what? Morrison can't do anything now."

"No? Listen, Mr. Durham, the emperors of Rome only ruled part of one little world, but they didn't give it up easily. Morrison won't, either. Remember, things are so bad for him now they can't possibly get any worse, only better."

Durham looked out the window. It was a double one, with a vacuum between the panes and protective mesh on the outside. The green air pressed thick against it. The sun had wheeled far over, and the shadows of the buildings were long and black.

"Do you stay here much?" he asked.

"I have lately," said Karlovic. "I had to. My life wasn't safe on Nanta Dik. You've no idea how high their feelings run there, thanks to Morrison." He began to set the table. Durham made no move to help. He was tired. He watched the shadows lengthen and fill the circle of lofty walls with their darkness.

"Couldn't the government there protect you?"

"Only part of the government wants to. And Morrison is working hard to frighten them with all this propaganda about the Bitter Star."

"Propaganda. That's what he said. Is it?"

"Absolutely—as far as the Senyans using it is concerned. But the thing itself is real. It's in the city here. I've seen it."

Karlovic put the heated containers on the table and sat down. He began methodically to eat.

"It's kind of a weird story. Probably it could only have happened on a world like this, with a totally non-human, bio-chemical set-up. Senyan science started early and advanced fast, a good deal faster than it did on Nanta Dik, for some reason. They did a lot of experimenting with solar energy and atomics and the forces that lie just on the borderline of life—or maybe intelligence would be a better word."

"Aren't the two more or less synonymous?"

"A hunk of platinum sponge or a mess of colloids can be intelligent, but never alive. The Star is. The darkbirds are. They're not matter, they're merely a nexus of interacting particles. But they live and

"What about the Star?"

The scientists were trying for an energy matrix that would absorb solar power and store it like a battery. Something slipped, and the result was the Bitter Star. It absorbs solar power, all right, but in the form of heat, and it will take heat from anything. And it doesn't give it up. It merely absorbs more and more until every living thing near it is frozen and there's no more heat to be had. The Senyan scientists didn't know quite what to do with this thing they had created, but they didn't want to destroy it, either. It had too many angles they wanted to study. So they made the darkbirds, on the same pattern but without the heat-hunger, and with a readier intelligence, to be a bridge between themselves and the Star, to control it. They studied the thing until it proved too dangerous, and they prisoned it by simply starving it at a temperature of absolute zero. So it has stayed ever since, but the darkbirds still guard it in case anything should happen to free it again. They almost seem to love it, in some odd unfleshly way."

Durham frowned. "Then it *could* be used against Nanta Dik."

"Oh yes," said Karlovic sombrely. "In fact it was, once. The Star shone in their sky in midsummer, and the crops blackened and the rivers froze, and men died where they stood in the fields. The Senyans won the war. That was a thousand years ago, but the Nantans never quite forgot it."

He got up and went morosely to the sink, carrying dishes. "I keep telling Jubb he ought to get rid of the thing. It's a sore point. But—"

Somewhere below there was a very loud noise. The floor rose up and then settled again. Almost at once the air was full of dust, and an alarm bell began a strident ringing. Karlovic's mouth opened and closed twice, as though he was trying to say something. He let the dishes fall clattering around his feet, and then he ran with all his might out of the room and along the hall.

Durham followed him. There was now no sound at all from below. The pumps had stopped.

Karlovic found his tongue. "Cover your face. Don't breathe."

DURHAM saw a thin grey whorl of greenish mist moving into the hall. He pressed his handkerchief over his mouth and nose and made his legs go, hard and fast. He was right on top of Karlovic when they stumbled into the airlock. It was still clear.

They helped each other into their suits, panting in the stagnant air. Then, through the helmet audio, Durham could hear sounds from outside, muffled shouts and trappings. Karlovic went back into the consulate where the green mist was already clinging around his knees, and looked out a window into the circle. Over his shoulder Durham could see Senyans milling around and he thought they were rioters, but Karlovic said, "It's all right, they're Jubb's guards."

They went back to the airlock, and from there into the open circle. Senyans escorted them hastily into the adjoining building, and Durham saw that guard posts were being set up. There was a gaping hole in the side of the consulate and the pavement was shattered, and there were pieces of machinery and stuff lying around. Durham figured rapidly in his head how much oxygen he had in his suit pack, and how long it would take to repair the consulate and get the air conditioning working again, and how long it would be before a ship could get here from Nanta Dik. He looked at Karlovic, whose face was white as chalk inside his helmet.

"The lifeboat," he said.

Karlovic nodded. Some color came back into his face. "Yes, the lifeboat. We can live in it until the ship comes." He ran his tongue over his lips as though they were very dry. "Didn't I tell you Morrison wouldn't give up easy? Oh lord, the lifeboat!" He began to jabber urgently at the Senyans in their own tongue, and again his expression was agonized. Durham didn't need to be told what he was thinking. If anything happened to that lifeboat, they were two dead men on a world where humans had no biological right to be.

They were brought into a room where Jubb was busy with a bank of communicators and a batch of harried aides. The room was enormous, but it did not dwarf the Senyans, and the sombre colors did not seem

depressing in their own light. Jubb said, as they came in the door,

"I've had a heavy guard set on your lifeboat. I don't think anyone can repeat that hit-and-run bombing—" He cursed in a remarkably human fashion, naming Morrison and the Senyan fools who let themselves be used. "You are all right, Karlovic—Mr. Durham? Quite safe? I've ordered a motor convoy. There are signs of unrest all over the city—apparently word has gone out that you, Durham, are carrying the unification agreement for my signature, and that the terms are a complete surrender on our part to human rule. Does it cheer you two to know that the human race is not alone in producing fools and madmen? Once on the spaceport you will be safe, my naval units will see to that, and my troops are already in the streets. They have orders to look out for you. Go with fortune."

They were taken out another way, where three heavy trucks and several smaller vehicles were drawn up. The Senyans in them wore a distinctive harness and were armed, and the vehicles all had armor plated bodies. Durham and Karlovic were lifted into one of the trucks, which was already filled with Senyan soldiers. The convoy moved off.

Durham braced himself in a corner and looked at Karlovic. "Happened fast, didn't it? Awfully fast."

"Violent things always do. You're not much used to violence, are you? Neither am I. Neither are most people. They get it shoved at them."

"I don't think we're through with it yet," said Durham.

Karlovic said, "I told you."

For some time there was only the rushing and jolting of the truck, the roar of motors and a kind of dim uneasy background of sound as though the whole city stirred and seethed. Durham was frightened. The food he had eaten had turned against him, he was stifling in his own sweat, and he thought of Morrison cruising comfortably somewhere out in space, smoking cigarettes and drinking good whiskey and sending down a message now and then, the way a man pokes with a stick at a brace of beetles, stirring them casually toward death.

The truck stopped in front of an empty

of hate and fear, and the taste of them was sour in his mouth.

Somebody said to them, "We're on the spaceport highway now. It won't be long."

A minute later somebody shouted and Karlovic caught the Senyan word and echoed it. "Barricade!" The truck rocked and whirled about and there were great crashes in the night that had fallen. Durham was thrown to his knees. The truck raced at full speed. There were sounds of fighting that now rose and now grew faint, and the truck lurched and swerved, and then there were more roars and crashes and it came violently to a halt. The Senyans began firing out of the loopholes in the armored sides. Some of them leaped out of the truck, beckoning Durham and Karlovic to come after them. A large force of rioters was attacking what remained of the convoy, which had been forced back into the city. Four of the Senyan soldiers ran with the two men into a side street, but a small body of rioters caught up with them. The soldiers turned to fight, and Karlovic said in a voice that was now curiously calm,

"If we're quick enough they may lose sight of us in the darkness."

He turned into an areaway between two buildings, and then into another, and Durham ran beside him through the cold green mist and the dim glow of lamps that glimmered on the alien walls. The sound of the fighting died away. They turned more corners, hunting always for the darkest shadows, hoping to meet a patrol. But the streets were deserted and all the doors barred tight. Finally Durham stopped.

"How much oxygen you got left?"

Karlovic peered at the illuminated indicator on the wrist of his suit. "Hour. Maybe less."

Both men were breathing hard, panting, burning up the precious stuff of life. Durham said,

"I won't last that long. Listen, Karlovic. Where is the Bitter Star?"

Karlovic's face was a pale blur inside his helmet. "You crazy? You can't—"

Durham put his two hands on the shoulders of Karlovic's suit and leaned his helmet close so that it clicked on Karlovic's.

"Maybe I'm crazy. In thirty, forty minutes I'll be dead, so what will a quarter

then? Listen, Karlovic, I want to live." He pointed back the way they had come. "You think we can walk through that to the spaceport in time?"

"No."

"We got anyplace else to go?"

"No."

"All right then. Let's give 'em hell."

"But they're not all our enemies. Jubb, my friends—"

"Friend or enemy, they'll clear the way. We might just make it, Karlovic. You said the darkbirds control it, and you can talk to them." He shook Karlovic viciously. "Where is it? Don't you understand? If we use it we can hound Morrison out of space!"

Karlovic turned and began to walk fast, sobbing as he went. "The darkbirds will never let us. You don't know what you're doing."

"I know one thing. I'm sick of being pushed, pushed, pushed, into corners, into holes, where I can't breathe. I'm going to—" He shut his teeth tight together and walked fast beside Karlovic, starting at every sound and shadow.

By twining alleys and streets where nothing moved for fear of the violence that was abroad that night, Karlovic led Durham to an open space like a park with vast locked gates that could keep a Senyan out but not a little agile human who could climb like a monkey with the fear of death upon him. Beyond the gates great wrinkled lichens as tall as trees grew in orderly rows, and a walk led inward. The lichens bent and rustled in the wind, and Durham's suit was wet with a poisonous dew.

The walk ended in a portico, and the portico was part of a building, round and squat as though a portion of its mass was underground. They passed through a narrow door into a place of utter silence, and a darkbird hung there, barring their way.

"Jubb," said Durham. "Tell it Jubb has sent us. Tell it the Bitter Star must be freed again to destroy Jubb's enemies."

Karlovic spoke to the shadow. Others came to join it. There was a flurry of hooting and chittering, and then the one Karlovic had been speaking to disappeared in the uncanny fashion of its kind. The others stayed, a barrier between the two men and a ramp that led steeply down.

Karlovic sat down wearily on the chill stone. "It isn't any use," he said. "I knew it wouldn't be. The darkbird has gone to ask Jubb if what we say is true."

Durham sat down, too. He did not even bother to look at the indicator on his wrist. No use. The end. Finish. He shut his eyes.

There was a stir and a hooting in the air. Karlovic gasped. Then he began to shake Durham, laughing like a woman who has heard a risque story. "Didn't you hear? The bird came back, and Jubb said—Jubb said Morrison has been preaching the war of the Bitter Star, so let him have it."

He grasped Durham's suit by the shoulders and pulled him to his feet, and they ran with the cloud of shadows, down into the dimness below.

VIII

THERE was a small sealed chamber with a thick window, and beyond it was a circular space, not too large, walled with triple walls of glass with a vacuum between. The air was full of darkbirds, moving without hindrance through the walls or hovering where they chose, above the thing that slept inside.

Durham blinked and turned his head away, and then looked back again. And Karlovic said softly, "Beautiful, isn't it? But sad, too, somehow, I don't know why."

Durham felt it, a subliminal feeling without any reason to it, like the sadness of a summer night or of birth and laughter or of gull's wings white and swift against the sky. The Star shone, palely, gently. He tried to see if it was round or any other shape, if it was solid or vaporous, but he could not see anything but that soft shining, like mist around a winter moon.

Durham shook himself and wondered why, when he was already so sure of death, he should be so afraid. "All right," he said. "How is it freed?"

"The darkbirds do that. Watch."

He spoke to them, one word, and in the glass-walled prison there was a stirring and a swirling of shadows around the soft shining of the Star. Durham saw a disc set in the metal overhead. One of the darkbirds touched it. There was an intense blue flare of light, and Durham felt the throbbing

of hidden dynamos, a secret surge of power. The glass walls darkened and grew dim, the low roof turned and opened to the sky. And through the barrier window, Durham watched the waking of a star.

He saw the frosty shining brighten and spread out in slow unfurling veils. There was a moment when the whole building seemed filled with moonfire as cold as the breath of outer space and as beautiful as the face of a dream, and then it was gone, and the darkbirds were gone with it.

"Come on," said Karlovic, a harsh incongruous voice in the stunned darkness that was left behind, and Durham came, up the ramp and out into the parklike space beyond, and all the tall lichens were standing dead and sheathed in ice.

High above, burning cold over the city, a new star shone.

They followed it, through a silence as deep as the end of the world. Everything had taken cover at the rising of that star, and only the two men moved, the thermal units of their suits turned on high, through streets all glazed with ice and cluttered here and there with the wreckage and the dead of the rioting. The darkbirds were forcing the Star to stay high, but even so nothing could live long without protection in that sudden, terrible winter.

The road to the port lay blank and bare. They found one of the smaller vehicles, its driver dead beside it. Karlovic got it going, moving the great levers with Durham's help. After that they rushed faster through the empty night. Durham shut his eyes, thinking.

He opened them, and the spaceport of Senya Dik lay black and deserted around him, and Karlovic was gasping to him for help. Together they pulled down the lever that stopped their conveyance. They scrambled down and ran out toward the small lifeboat, slipping and stumbling, dying inside their suits. They fell into the airlock, and Durham slammed the door and spun the wheel, waiting out the agonizing seconds while the tiny chamber cleared and then refilled, and they could tear off their helmets and breathe again. They looked at each other and laughed, and hugged each other, and laughed again, and then went in to the cabin.

The communicator was flashing its light and burring stridently.

Durham switched it on. Jubb's face appeared in the tiny screen. "You are safe? Good, good. For a moment I thought—! Listen, I have word from my patrol that Morrison has other ships with him now, spread out to catch you if by chance you get through. That is what decided me to use the Bitter Star. I am angry, Karlovic. I am tired of mockery and lies and secret violence. I am tired of peace which is only a cloak for another man's aggression."

A darkbird came into the cabin and hung over Durham's shoulder. "It will carry your messages," said Jubb. "I am leaving now for the port, and my own flagship. We go together. Good luck."

The screen went dead. Durham said, "Strap in, we're taking off."

THE Star, with its herding pack of shadows, set a course that took them steeply up out of Senya Dik's shadow, into the full flood of the green sun's light. The darkbird spoke by Durham's shoulder, and Karlovic said,

"The Star must feed—or recharge itself, as you would say, with solar heat. Watch it, Durham. Watch it grow."

He watched. The Star spread out its misty substance, spreading it wide to the sun, and the soft shining of it brightened to an angry glare that grew and widened and became like a burning cloud, not green like the sunlight but white as pearl.

Far off to one side of it Durham saw the glinting of a ship's hull. He pointed to it.

Karlovic worked with the communicator. In a minute the screen lit up, and Morrison's face was in it.

"Hello, Morrison," he said. "Hello, thief."

Morrison's face was as hard and white as something carved from bone.

"It wasn't just an old wive's tale, Morrison," he said. "It was true, and here it is. The Bitter Star, Morrison."

Karlovic reached over and shook him, pointing out the viewport. Coming swiftly in toward them was a small ship, curiously shaped before.

"Space-sweep," Karlovic said. "Those funny bulges are torpedo tubes, and the

torpedoes carry heavy scatter charges to clear away debris so the ore ships can come in."

Durham said to the image in the screen, "Call him off."

Morrison showed the edges of his teeth, and asked, "Why should I?"

Durham nodded to Karlovic, who spoke to the darkbird. It disappeared. Within a few seconds the Star had begun to move. It moved fast, the angry gleaming of its body making a streak like a white comet across the green-lit void. It wrapped itself around the space-sweep, and then it lifted and the ship continued on its way unchanged.

Morrison laughed.

The sweep rushed on toward the lifeboat. Its tubes were open, but nothing came out of them. Durham shifted course to clear it, and it blundered on by. In the screen, Morrison's image turned and spoke to someone, and the someone answered, "I can't, they just aren't there."

Morrison turned again to Durham, or rather to the image of him that was on his own screen. "I know what I'm supposed to say now, but I'm not going to say it. I've got Miss Hawtree with me, had you forgotten that? I don't think you've suddenly acquired that kind of guts."

Durham shook his head. "I don't need them. I want you alive, Morrison. But I don't give a tinker's damn what happens to anybody else in this whole backside of nowhere you call 9G. Nobody and nothing. And I have the Bitter Star to back me up. I am wondering how many loyal employees of Universal Minerals, and how many stupid Wanbecqs are going to sacrifice their lives just to keep me from getting my hands on you. Call them up, Morrison, and count them out, and we'll send the Star to see them."

The Star glowed and glimmered and grew to a great shining, and a look of worry deepened on Karlovic's face. Morrison did not answer, and Durham could see the thoughts going round and round in his mind, the possibilities being weighed and evaluated. Then the someone who was behind Morrison and out of scanner range said in a queer flat voice,

"The tug *Varney* calling in, sir. They boarded the sweep."

"What?"

"All dead, sir. Frozen. Even the air was frozen. They said to tell you they're going home."

"All right," said Morrison softly. "Durham, I'm going home too, to Nanta Dik. Let's see if you can follow me there."

He broke contact. In the distance, Durham saw the bright speck that was Morrison's ship make a wheeling curve and speed away. Durham said grimly to Karlovic,

"Tell the darkbirds to follow with the Star. And then get hold of somebody on Nanta Dik, somebody with authority. Tell them everything that's happened. Tell them Morrison is all we want. We'll see how close they let him get to home."

"I don't know," said Karlovic, and got busy with the communicator. Half an hour later he sighed and blanked the screen. "They're sending up a squadron to intercept Morrison. But they're scared. They're scared of the Star. I've promised them—and nothing had better happen, Durham."

Durham said, "We'd better send word to Jubb."

For what seemed an eternity they fled through the green blaze of the sun, after the ship Durham could no longer see. And ahead of the lifeboat, a light and a portent in the void, went the Bitter Star with its attendant shadows. And Durham, too, began to worry, he was not sure why. Jubb's flagship closed up to them, a vast dark whale beside a minnow. And after a while a tiny bright ball that was a planet came spinning toward them. Karlovic pointed.

Hung like a net across space, between them and the planet, was a series of glittering metallic flecks.

"The squadron."

The communicator buzzed. Karlovic snapped it on, and the face of a Nantan officer appeared on the screen.

"We have Morrison," he said. "Come no closer with the Star."

Karlovic spoke to the darkbird, Durham's hands, heavy with weariness, shoved the lifeboat until it hung almost motionless. Jubb's great dark cruiser slowed also. Above and between them burned the Bitter Star. It had ceased to move.

Durham said, "The Star will come no closer."

"Mr. Karlovic," said the Nantan. "Bring your lifeboat in slowly, and alone."

The lifeboat came in among the ships of the squadron.

"Now," said the Nantan officer, "withdraw the Star."

Karlovic said, "Jubb will do so—"

"No," said Durham suddenly, "Jubb will not. Look there!"

SHINING with a furious light, the Star had torn itself away from the clustering shadows that hung around it.

Durham's heart congealed with a foretaste of icy death. The face of the Nantan officer paled, and Karlovic said in a voice that was not like his voice at all, "I must talk to Jubb."

He reached out to shift their single screen, and the Nantan officer said, "Wait, he is speaking on our alternate. I can adjust the scanner—"

The picture flopped, blurred, and cleared again, showing now in addition to the officer a part of the Nantan's alternate-channel screen. Jubb was speaking, and it seemed to Durham that the Senyan's strange face was clearly, humanly alarmed.

He said, "I cannot withdraw the Star. No, this is not a lie, a trick—hold your fire, you idiots! I'm the only hope you have now. The Star has profited by the lesson of its docility a thousand years ago, when it let itself be led back into captivity. Now it has grown, too much. It cannot be brought back to any world."

Durham looked out at the beautiful deadly thing blazing so splendidly in the void. "Can it be destroyed?"

"The darkbirds can destroy it," said Jubb. "If they will."

The Nantan officer, speaking from lips the color of ashes, said to the image of Jubb on the screen, "You have one minute to get it out of here before I fire."

Jubb turned his face away and spoke, to something they could not see.

Durham turned to Karlovic. "He said, 'If they will.' Does that mean—"

"I told you," said Karlovic, looking out the port, "that the darkbirds were created to guard the Star. And that, in a way, they love it. Who can say how much?"

They watched.

Out in space the little cloud of darkbirds moved toward the Star. Then, hesitantly, they stopped.

"They won't," said Karlovic, in a whisper. "Not even for Jubb."

Again Jubb spoke to the unseen messenger, as quietly as though it was a casual order. And presently a troubled movement rippled the swirling darkbirds.

Suddenly they moved, again herding the Star. Slowly at first, then more and more swiftly until it was only a streak of brilliant light, the darkbirds drove the Star straight toward the sun. And it was less a driving than an urging, a tempting, a promise of glory, a sweet betraying call from the mouth of the eternal Judas. The darkbirds led it, and it followed them.

In a moment, in that greater blaze, the Star was lost to view.

Karlovic's breath came out of him in a long sigh. "The only way it could be destroyed. Even its appetite for thermal energy could not swallow a sun."

"The darkbirds are coming back," Durham said. Then, wonderingly, "But they're not—"

The darkbirds were coming back from the green sun, but not toward Jubb's ship. And not toward any planet. They were flying like blurring shadows toward outer space, and if they heard Jubb's calling voice they paid no heed at all.

"They're gone," Karlovic said, unbelievably.

"Yes," said Jubb, very slowly. "They obeyed that order, but it was the last." He looked at the humans facing him, the men of Earth and the men of Nanta Dik, and he said, "Do you see now that there is no difference between us, that we of Senya Dik can teach betrayal just like men?"

Durham looked out into the shining void, but there was no sign now of the fleet and flying shadows. Intelligences, minds, beyond the understanding of heavy creatures like himself and Jubb. He wondered how far they would go, how long they would live, what things they would see.

Darkbirds, darkbirds, will you come back some day when we of flesh are ghosts and shadows, to frolic on our lonely worlds?

THE VIZIGRAPH

(Continued from page 3)

and I essential thing it has been so long assumed to be.

Mr. Tuning claims, joyously no doubt, that he has seen no signs of its popularity waning, innocently assuming that the import of my letter was that in a week or so, people would say, "Oh, I'm bored with this Sex routine. To heck with it! I'm going to collect butter flies instead," and that Sex would then vanish from the earth, an obsolete pastime. Mr. Tuning then goes on to apologize for not having lived under a rock . . . but that's all right; we understand that some landlords are a bit particular about their tenants.

Mr. Tuning, climbing his soapbox and puffing slightly, then goes on to make the thunderous observation that "Sex has proved to be a satisfactory method of propagating the race for quite some time now longer than you or I are capable of grasping." I said it before, Little Willie, and I reiterate: Sex has proved to be most unsatisfactory, and for the silent reasons backing up this claim I refer you to my original letter on the subject . . . which reasons I still find most convincing and irrefutable.

Also, in passing, may I say, Mr. Tuning, that I wish you would refrain from telling me "what I am capable of grasping"? I don't believe you are qualified to do so, whether you are qualified for anything would be an interesting topic for discussion . . . for somebody else to undertake. I'm prejudiced.

Although I fail to see how Plato happened to be dragged into this, I will admit that I did not know that he "decried sex as retarding his work." At least, I did not know that he, in particular, thus decried it; I do know that the sentiment has been rather common through the ages among men (and women) who have work to do, as opposed to those who merely attend to their jobs. Whether or not Plato was homosexual is entirely irrelevant and, at that, homosexuality is nothing but another aspect of that Sexuality which you, Mr. Tuning, praise and designate as immortal, Holy, Perverse, Exalting or what-have-you. The only objective (note that word "objective": please eschew an *ad hominem* conclusion) difference between homo- and hetero-sexuality lies in the matter of fecundation.

That we were created with sex I do not deny, nor see any need to do so. And because there was "throughout time" the impulse for man and woman to cleave to each other is no reason at all to assume that such will forever be the case. I will not give you opportunity to "deflate (my) arguments" concerning cases where men have not needed women, for I present no such arguments. What has gone before fails to interest me. I am not concerned with men needing women any more than I am with stallions needing mares, dogs needing bitches, etc. What I am concerned with is the possibility that Sex is just a phase in evolution, and that there may (and I believe, should) be a totally different method of propagation in some dim future, when, perhaps, humans will be not quite so pitifully human, and the dominant life-form of our time (that's us) will be regarded as something similar to a worm.

Somewhere else in the VIZI, a charming female named Trudy, to me in the same subject, said she was being one Elmor Busby. At that, she was being a little conceited, and considerably more real than the self-styled "Uncle." She says that sex

is the most intimate possible relationship between two humans. Ah-ah, Elmor; never heard of telepathy? Or aren't you a Believer?

Then there was something about women not being women, the hidden meaning of which I have not been able to ascertain. And then, the good Elmor says . . . ah, then, she says, "At its best, Sex is fun." Hoo-ray! At last, a keen, incisive definition and *raison d'être*. You are so right, fortunately or unfortunately, as the preference may be. You have hit it, Miss B.:

Sex is the height of hedonism.

Yours sincerely,

NORMAN J. CLARK

E PLURIBUS TENNESSEE

Route No. 4
Trenton, Tenn.

Dear Editor,

I'm sincere. I like PLANET. Maybe the dollar enclosed will help prove this. Yes, I'm subscribing to PLANET. May the Ghods of fandom have mercy on me.

Attention lovable Uncle Bill Tuning, don't you think that you're making an ass out of your own starved little ego? Let me be frank, Bill, I've always enjoyed reading your sage (you said so yourself, remember?) comments on life and fandom. But come a little closer, I will tell you a few facts. In the first place, Tennessee Williams is one of the best of the current crop of writers, and although I liked Hemingway's THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA I find very little of his other fiction appealing. Not that this means anything, but calling fans asses just because you disagree with their likes in authors is going one or three steps too far. Somehow, the hit on paper rarely seems to come completely out of the writer and on to the printed page. It stays on his own hands. . . . Have I made my point? I like your letters, Uncle Bill, but I do hate to see you make a fool of yourself.

A word to John Courtois. John, my boy, I don't think you owe anybody an apology. What you and I took as your way of trying to be funny. Maybe it's another case of wearing that old shoe. If, of course, it fits.

But still give the boy, Courtois, one illo for his guts. Next, comes Joe Keogh, and Val Walker.

Sincerely,

JAMES LEWIS

THE BIG PULP SECRET

1014 N. Tuckahoe St.
Falls Church, Va.

Dear L. K.,

By George, it is a pleasure to win an original; I was not old enough. While we're on the subject of illustrations, I note one Victor Paananen's comparison of Finlay and I. My boy, this just isn't done! Granted, Frank isn't Finlay's successor, he is one damned good artist. Unfortunately, you haven't seen his best work. And it is for the very same reason that you haven't seen Finlay in PS at all. I'll let you in on a secret: PLANET does not use the best quality back paper. It uses what is quaintly marketed as "pulp" paper. Due to this fact, the printing quality is not all it might be. This is no criticism of the printers (they may be real'g this . . .), but fine-line work simply won't print on pulp paper.

I have even learned that it once on one of the maps he never used Finlay on that paper. So

duck is new, but his job is so utterly frank and so strong, potent, & honest, have been stunned.

Now if I had the savvy and know-how of you fellows, I'd start in editing a series of pulps. I'd title them: FRESH DETECTIVE, FRESH ADVENTURE, FRESH MYSTERY, and FRESH SCIENCE FICTION. I'd edit each one of 'em in all four pulps about 15 years ago, and the need for a "fresh" approach in publishing, the evils of bluenosery, and finally I would state that my magazines while carrying top science fiction, would de-emphasize sadism of the Alaskan Spaceman category.

In other words: Sex is better approached in an open, tongue-in-cheek fashion. That would be my editorial policy, just as it was in the original SPICY pulps of 15 years ago.

Well, all of this has nothing to do with PLANET, and I seem to have gone off on a tangent. However I wanted to let somebody in on my ideas, even though they are probably impractical. Somebody in the pulp industry would surely have given my ideas some consideration by now. But if the bills ever start piling up, and the editors ever start yapping at Mr. Scott's heels, he really ought to give my ideas a try before it's too late in the towel.

Sincerely,

I. L. JACOBS

CHASTE

11121 Tascosa Dr.
Dallas 28, Texas

Dear Jack,

Well, whattaya know, a clean PLANET. I never thought I'd see the day when it didn't feature some nude pursued by an anxious male, or something of the sort. Even the inside illos are strictly s-f. What happened? Your mother catch you at it or something?

I guess you realize that many of your readers buy PLANET strictly for its superb letter column. VIZI seems to have some hidden personality with which even MADGE can't compete. Keep it up.

SIN: surely enough,

GEORGE JENNINGS

TOP KICKER

11th Airborne Division
Fort Campbell, Ky.

Dear Sir,

This short note contains a gripe against the letter that John Coonters wrote re: dog Christianity and dogs. I suppose one can discuss said letter as the penned effort of one who wrote on the spur of the moment, and is now feeling kind of silly that the thing ever made the printed page.

I also feel that the editor should never have permitted such tripe to reach the columns of VIZI. I feel the editor made a mistake when he gave Coonters the satisfaction of seeing "that thing" in print.

Now, I don't care to see a word of poster before getting out of bed at 6:00 a.m. being an expert hunter. So, I don't know how you say a dog is "all animal and all hunter." I can think of a lot of animals that are "more animal" than dogs. A dog is a hunter because he must hunt to satisfy his hunger. When a dog has had his fill of meat in front of his nose three times a day he stops hunting . . . but does he stop being a dog!

John, dear, I am a Christian. I feel personally

insulted when someone calls me an animal, biologically or otherwise. Your letter was a personal affront to all Christians (and dogs).

SGT. JOHN RAYBURN

LASTING IMPRESSION

2444 Valley Street
Berkeley, Cal.

Dear Editor,

You had me wondering about Algis Budrys until the Spring PLANET hit the stands. At first I had visions of Science-Fiction's first All-American ("... he can write, paint, edit . . .") but now that you printed the letter of explanation and apologized in public I imagine that nothing will come of my stupendous plans. Ah, well, there's always Jerome Bixby if we have to pick a one-man team!

Freas' artwork for Budrys' story was terrific. It may be the texture of the paper he uses, but the way the shadowing and blending work in the color is simply overwhelming. For inside illustrations I don't think there's a better artist than Freas to be had by PS. Bok and Finlay might be better than Kelly, but Senor Freas doesn't have to worry about the competition around Love Romances. And personally, I don't care for Finlay's work that is appearing now; back in the old issues he seemed to be much better.

Courtois' letter just proves that there is a terrific danger encountered when being a letter-hack. If a person happens to make a mistake and write a letter that annoys everyone, he hasn't much chance to rectify the situation. John did, of course, but his is a rather isolated case. The tough part about it all is the letter is in print, and there are probably one or thirty or forty thousand copies around this nation. If a person slips up on the radio his goof doesn't hang around to haunt him. But a guy has to be careful when writing to stff mags, especially PLANET. Extensive laboratory tests have proved that the woodpulp paper used on this fine, high-type publication can take quite a beating, and doesn't start falling apart until at least 100 years have passed; and by that time the letter writer hardly gives a darn any more.

Ever since Sol Galaxan graced your pulpy pages, PLANET has been infamous for the pen names it uses. And unless fifty million Frenchmen are wrong, V. E. Thiessen is a phoney moniker. Looking back over the years I find many fascinating pseudonyms (Oliver R. Oslow, Byron Tustin, Evelyn Goldstein, etc.), but none have as much power as V. E. Thiessen. Even the great Derrila Lopez can not hold a candle to this magnificent example of the "mysterious author." Keep using such powerful pen-names . . . they fascinate me!

In the event that you print this dashing attempt at writing scintillating prose, it may be that some readers would be interested in joining the KEEPGOPE ("Keep PLANET In The Good Old Pulpy League") Association that I have formed. Those of you who have the desire to serve your country should write me. Perhaps we can form chapters and all that; and I plan to send out autographed pictures of George B. Sack to all members. A truly wonderful organization like this deserves your support!

At the best,

Doc Wagers

Ed's Note: Fifty million Frenchmen, led by Marshal Wagers, are wrong. The name V. E. Thiessen is as legitimate as the eagles the gentleman wore atop his shoulders when he penned CITY OF HILL-

only for the atmosphere it creates. Many of the digest size magazines print better stories, but I personally would feel a loss if PLANET, which is indisputably the best of the pulps, changed.

All the best to all,

A. KEITH KING

FAST SHUFFLE

c/o Permanent Poker Game
Student Union
University of Tulsa
Tulsa, Oklahoma

Dear Editor,

I take time out from my activities only to correct a bad impression some people may be getting about college students. I believe that the efforts of Val Walker and Bill Tuning may lead some to believe that all college students do is study.

Now I, for one, have been going to college for five years and have never been to class, yet I have received an education of invaluable aid for the future. You see, I am learning the proper way to fill an inside straight.

Now I ask you, isn't that useful education? What will Walker and Tuning have to face the world with when they finish college—just a mass of philosophy, psychology and literature, that's what. I doubt if either Walker or Tuning could tell you the mathematical chances of coming up with a royal flush three straight deals, (185,973,859,087,567,001 to 1). Now there is a jolly worthwhile bit of business.

I repeat, please dear fen, don't believe that college is all work and study. The true college student never leaves the student-union, except of course for such necessities as dances, parties, basketball and football games.

I will bet two blue chips that the first man on the moon will have to know the proper technique of filling an inside straight; not the theory of some ancient philosopher. (I'll bet Mr. Henodist can't play a decent hand of poker.)

Oh yes, PLANET is very good. I read it while the dealer shuffles.

Sincerely,

JACK O'CLUBS

SWEET BREATH FROM THE NORTH

365 Seventh Avenue
Ville Lasalle, Que.
Dominion of Canada

Dear Sir,

Up into the dismal fastnesses of Quebec (or at least what we believe is the popular American conception of our fair province) has come the winter issue of your magazine. Like a sweet breath from heaven it dissipates our boredom and enriches our lives with fantasy. Each new jewel it offers is more superb than the last, each delightful story an illustration of man's genius.

Only who would realize it from that cover? Tell me, is that beautiful face gazing at me a satire on modern woman? Perhaps Mr. Budrys intimates that she has too much freedom, and should have prominently displayed controls so that she can be turned off when need be. Then again, maybe he suggests that woman's devious mind is too hard to comprehend, and dials would make it easier for slow-witted males to understand her. Since I found no reference to the cover in the stories, I can only imagine what it represents. Seriously, though, it does not do justice to your stories.

A plaudit for BOTTOM IS UP. Banks has poked fun very engagingly at an important human weakness: the inability of most people to probe beneath the veneer that the individual presents to the world, in order to find his real character. Curry's THE RECLUSE invokes interesting connotations. Is man's freedom so important to him that he will give up the possibility of returning to his work, his society, and even his family to retain it? It appears that Effron has forgotten one thing in his otherwise enjoyable story THE ULTIMATE EVE. He tells us that Commander Ydnas had been selected after extensive testing and conditioning. Therefore we must assume he was of superior intelligence. Also, as a commander, he obviously had had some scientific training. Yet he did what even the amateur scientist is taught not to do. He made only one test. Even supposing that blindness was unknown on his planet, he should have, and in fact would have, realized that one test for such an important weapon was not enough. All in all, your short stories were very interesting, while your longer ones were somewhat lower in standard.

If I may be so bold, could I register a plea for more "social theme" and philosophical stories? Of course, there are those whose constant howl for less thought and more action in science-fiction seems to have hypnotized many an editor. My only reply is if that is what they desire, they should go back to comics. What has made science-fiction noteworthy is not its science which is often unreliable; but its desire to analyze the causes of man's behavior, and its attempt to understand what effects this behavior will have on the future. Thus mature science fiction is more concerned with the stimulus and result of the action, while space opera glories mainly in the action itself. As can be seen, many of the recent classics in this field (Orwell's NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR, Pohl and Kornbluth's THE SPACE MERCHANTS) are in the mature science-fiction class. Even the ones that aren't (Bradbury's THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES, Heinlein's THE GREEN HILLS OF EARTH) show a far deeper appreciation of human character than is found in space opera. If science-fiction should concern itself mainly with adventure, it will eventually degenerate to the level of other pulp fiction.

"Christianity can be best described as a two thousand-year experiment in false logic." I can see now why Mr. Courtois annoys some of your readers. However, as Americans are so eager to point out, yours is a free country. It can only remain so as long as people follow John's example in voicing their ideas, no matter how contrary they may be to public opinion.

John's views on Christianity are rather dogmatic and, as is usually the case with dogmatism, partially untrue. Broadly speaking, religion is composed of two basic factors—faith and morality, the former dealing with the supernatural or divine, and the latter with social practice. Therefore, this logic must be viewed in terms of both these facets.

While I agree with his opinion of faith, the same judgment cannot be applied to morality. Why? Simply because no one has been able to define and prove what constitutes morality. Because we know nothing of the mental and spiritual life of other worlds, our conception of morality is limited to one planet. Since we have no reason to assume (or not to assume) that our visualization of morality has any connection with the universal or highest existing form of this, our definition of morality must needs be based simply on theory and, thus, remain inconclusive. We can only conclude that since man

has never proven what is goodness, he can never make the sweeping claim that any moral pattern is logical or illogical. Which is what our friend in his conceit has done. But if we cannot prove what is morality, how can we assess the merits of Christianity as an ethical doctrine? The native of New Guinea a few centuries ago found eating his enemies a logical part of his social pattern. On the other hand, the American or Canadian would not. Thus I believe that any conception of goodness can only be valued in relation to the needs of the society it controls.

Civilization (in the modern sense of the term) is highly complex, with many factors intermeshing and interdepending upon one another within it. Co-operation is essential in such a structure, for if people or nations strive simply for their own personal ends, since these ends conflict, clashes will inevitably occur. As the selfishness is continued the strife becomes more widespread with the result that the interdependence begins to break down, which in turn causes a decay in the civilization. The past world wars are ample proof of that. John tells us that Christianity is illogical because it doesn't allow us to mate, steal, or kill when we wish (although this doesn't seem to hinder some people). Unfortunately, he has not examined the problem very carefully.

For co-operation to succeed people must trust one another. They can hardly do this if they are constantly hurting each other—whether it be by stealing, killing or erratic mating. Hence our moral code which attempts to stop these pain-inflicting actions and thus create a mood of trust among people. Gradually, of course, the moral code becomes a legal one and thus receives a greater assurance that it will be heeded.

Of course man is frustrated. However, rather than this being the fault of Christianity, it results from the tragedy that man has gained great scientific knowledge, while his moral maturity has not kept pace. Frustration is caused by the fact that he is a violent animal given to physical expression in a society, which because of its scientific power, cannot tolerate violence. With the advent of the thermo-nuclear weapon, this conflict between the scientific and moral natures of man is accentuated.

Thus the frustration, at least nationally, is likely to grow worse. We have two choices. Either we give way to these frustrations as John intimates we should, and destroy our civilization; or we conquer the socially destructive habits and the desires that emanate from them, and go on to create our "utopia." Thus John has actually twisted the meaning to be derived from his example. He claims that

Christianity is bad because it does not allow man to do what he wants. In reality, this is good, for as I have shown, by doing so Christianity is protecting man's social structure and his progress. The summing up can perhaps be shown more clearly in a syllogistic form.

Major Premise: co-operation is essential to civilization.

Minor Premise: Christianity, by eradicating socially destructive habits and creating trust among people, induces co-operation.

Conclusion: therefore the moral doctrines of Christianity are essential and thus logical.

John claims that he does not take himself seriously. One wonders if this could not be a means of saving face when the replies to his letters start pouring in.

In closing, let me congratulate you on your policy of controversy in the VIZIGRAPH. It is one of the best letter columns I have come across in a science-fiction magazine.

So 'til PLANET becomes planet-wide, I remain,
GLEN SIEBRASSE

PROGNOSTICATOR?

Box 72
Kilgore, Texas

Dear Editor:

STARTLING STORIES has gone from bi-monthly to quarterly and has combined with its two companion magazines. That makes three paper pulps left, I believe, in the entire science-fiction field.

PLANET is through. I now see that you have no intention of changing PLANET. So I'll say good bye now . . . because when this letter appears in the shredded pages of PLANET it will probably be the last issue.

'Bye for always,

JIM GEORGE

ART SUPREME

P. O. Box 1545
Marysville, Calif.

Dear Sir:

I've read and re-read Mr. Marmor's letter and can come to only one conclusion: he can't be pleased. Another Joe K.?

He should remember a picture is worth many, many words.

Keep Freas and Emsh, by all means.

Enough. . . .

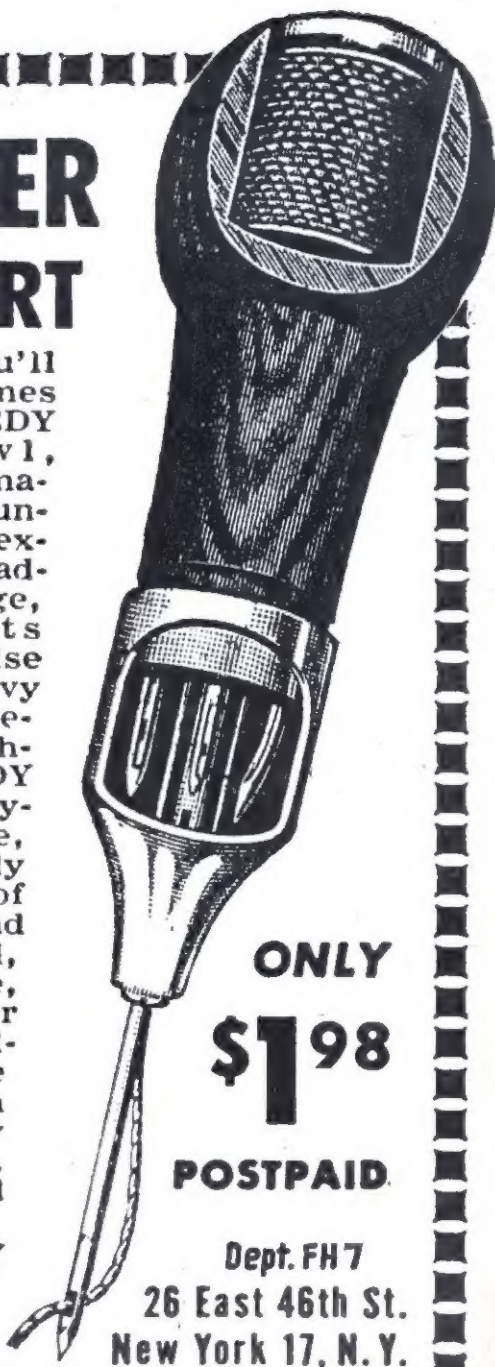
Yours truly,

JOHNNY FRITZ

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